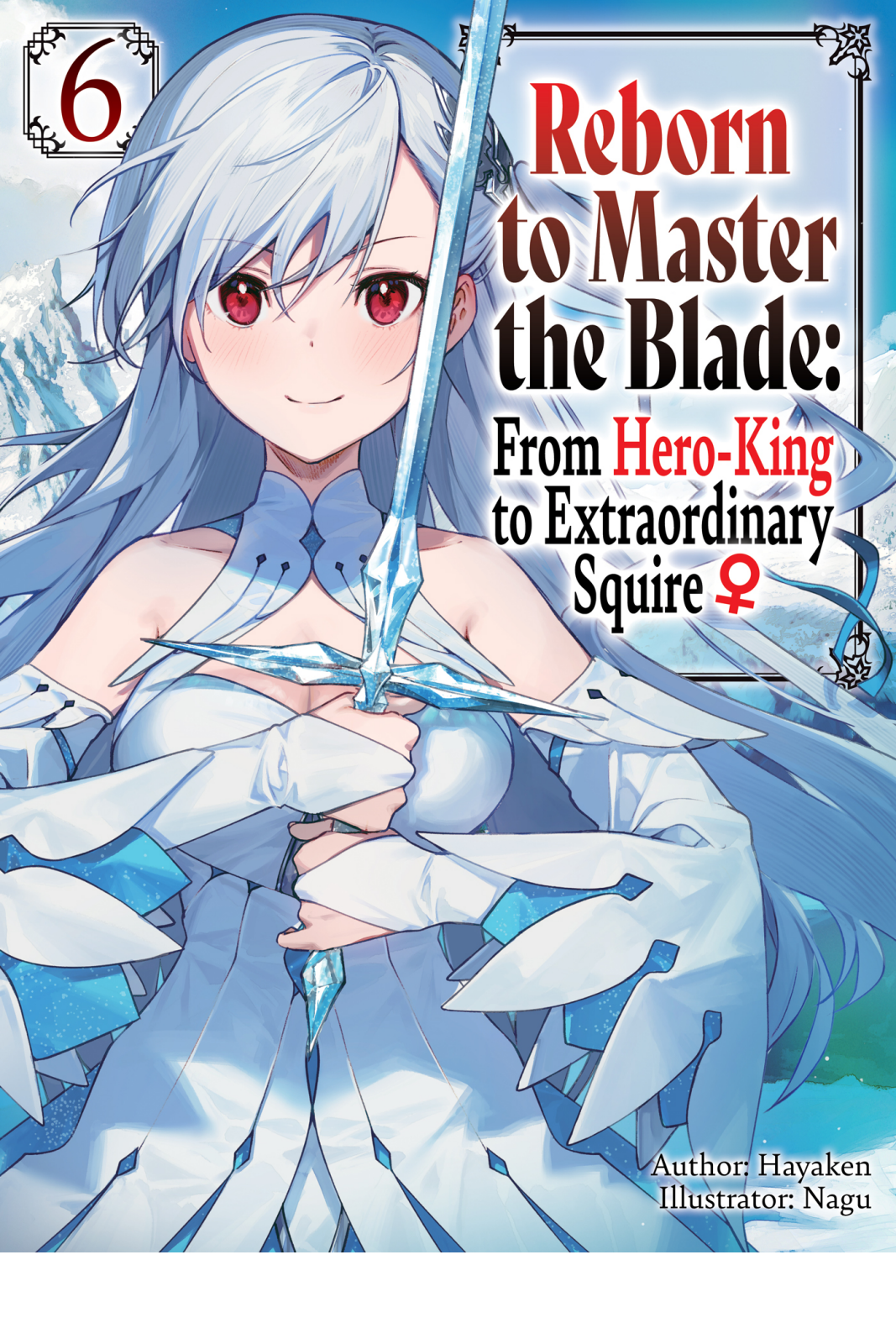




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Reborn to Master the Blade:

From **Hero-King**
to Extraordinary
Squire ♀

Author: Hayaken
Illustrator: Nagu



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Chapter I: Inglis, Age 15—The Ancient Dragon and the (Former) Old King (1)

“See? There’s a bit of a cutout at the chest, and the sleeves have fluttery details.”

“Hmm, like this?”

“Yeah, that’s it! I knew you’d get it, Rani.”

“Of course I do. Dressing you up is my thing,” Rafinha boasted. She and Inglis had spread out a sheet of paper on the deck of the damaged Flygear Port and were happily discussing its contents. Her pen raced over the paper, marking down Inglis’s requests for a ceremonial dress with winglike ornamentation. “And you want it in light blue and white? It’ll be adorable, but it might be a bit light for around here.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure I’ll be warm.”

“Huh? What do you mean? I can’t make the dress have powers like an Artifact.”

“Hm? Trust me, it’ll be fine. Think you can sew this?”

“I think so. The supplies we brought are still safe and sound.” Rafinha half climbed into one of the larger bundles. “Hmm... There it is! This’ll be perfect for what you described!” In her arms were bolts of fabric in white and light blue.

“Ooh! Great! Then, as soon as you can get to it.”

“Okay! Just leave it to me!”

“Hey, hold it, you two!” a voice chided. “We don’t have time to play around like that!”

He was one of the knights of Alcard, freed from Leclair, a man in his midtwenties who nonetheless was the highest ranking of the survivors and had taken to acting as their representative. He’d said his name was Lewin.

“Hey, we have a reason for this.” Rafinha, at least, seemed to be fully convinced.

“Huh?” Inglis asked. “Oh, yeah... This is a priestess’s habit—it’s for hearing an ancient dragon’s voice. If I wear this, I should be able to communicate with him.”

“Should” was the operative word, but Inglis had actually seen it in her past life. A woman claiming to be a priestess of the ancient

dragons had worn that outfit in order to communicate with the ancient dragon Fufailbane. The ceremonial dress had seemed to contain some small tinge of mana. Furthermore, Fufailbane had become less hostile when seeing it and more willing to communicate, even if only in bemused curiosity.

The priestess had said it was a behavior learned from the custom of sacrificing maidens. Assuming the woman was right, Inglis could communicate with the ancient dragon if she observed the expected formalities. She deeply wanted to have that conversation and find out what had happened in this world while she was gone.

Besides, it'd be a plus if Fufailbane happened to attack her under the assumption that she truly was a sacrifice. If anything, she was hoping for that to come to pass. If anything, being reborn as a woman had fortunately made such a thing more likely.

"Huh? You want to talk with it?" Rafinha pointed down toward where Leclair had been. In the crater that now existed, a dragon's tail protruded like a gigantic tree.

After driving off the hial menace Tiffanyer, loyal to the Papal League, and putting an end to her ravages of Alcard, Inglis and her group had gotten the Flygear Port up and moving again. Tiffanyer's attack had damaged it, but emergency repairs had made it flightworthy again, albeit only at slow speeds. It had taken around half a day to get back to it and then move it into the air, and in that time there had been no change in the tail's condition.

"Well, I should at least ask him how he wants to be served, right?" Inglis said.

"Aha ha ha. Yeah, I guess."

Leone gasped, raising her voice both in surprise and in disgust. "Wait, you were serious when you said you were going to eat it?!"

"Well, I suppose we shouldn't be too surprised," Liselotte said. "But if they keep saying that..." Liselotte's concern was immediately confirmed by Lewin's increasing skepticism. The Alcardian knight didn't know how to take what he was hearing.

"No, no, wait!" he shouted. "That thing doesn't look like it's going anywhere, so we should just leave it alone. Maybe post a small guard. More importantly, we need to get to the capital and report to His Majesty that we've driven off the hial menace."

"Isn't that why we lent Flygears to send messengers to the capital and the army on the border?" Inglis asked.

"No, Prince Lahti must make his triumphant entrance!" Lewin insisted. "Otherwise, his great deeds will—"

"Be swept under the rug by opportunists who did nothing themselves?"

"That's right. Prince Lahti saved my life, and in return I offer it up

to him! For his sake!"

Inglis understood what Lewin meant: they must not be late to make their move in the machinations which would soon envelop the political leadership.

And he seemed to truly want to devote himself to Lahti. On the other hand, doing so was also an advantageous career move. That much was undeniable. Were Lahti to become king, he would need allies. But...it was still too early for them to move hastily.

She shook her head. "No. We can't. It's too soon. We still have important things to do here."

"What do you mean?" Lewin asked.

"Indeed, we're no longer under threat from the hial menace of Highland. Nonetheless, the people around Leclair are still without food, suffering from her plundering. If the situation continues like this, many are sure to starve. What difference would it make, then, if we simply left? Would not their fates be the same as if we'd failed to stop her?"

Lewin finally realized the severity of their circumstances. Perhaps he'd been imprisoned in Leclair for so long that he possessed no idea of the larger situation affecting the country.

"If that's the case, then we must address it. When did this happen? Have you seen it firsthand?"

"Just recently. On our way here, we saw many people going hungry," Rafinha answered.

"She's right. I was with them. We have to do something about this—and fast." Lahti's confirmation was enough to thoroughly persuade Lewin.

"Ugh, I see... But wait, then shouldn't Prince Lahti head to the capital immediately?" Lewin suggested. "We must petition His Majesty to set up food aid for the people! It can be sent from the army on the border! If the prince is there, I think it will be easier to proceed."

"But will it really go so smoothly? This is a race against time," Inglis objected.

"If there's no food in the area, then we have no choice but to bring it in from areas that do have it, right?" Lewin continued. "Anyway, we need to do our utmost—"

"Hold on. There *is* food here. See?" Inglis pointed down at the dragon's tail.

The conversation had turned, once again, to the ancient dragon Fufailbane.

"What?! Y-You're going to kill it and distribute it as food to the people?"

"Yeah. That seems to be the quickest solution, doesn't it?" Inglis smiled at the stunned knight.

Without that assumption, she wouldn't have allowed Tiffanyer, Harim, and the Highlanders to leave with Leclair, which presumably still held the stolen food. In that case, taking back the town would have been necessary.

However, that would also have made negotiations more complex. Reclaiming the food would have taken time. Tiffanyer could have regained consciousness and brought the negotiations to an impasse. As lovely and pure a maiden as she looked, her mind was cunning and calculating. She was fundamentally different from Eris and Ripple, beautiful in both body and spirit. She'd have imposed some burdensome conditions upon them once she knew their goal. Plus, she may have had some idea that her predecessor, Evel, had plans for the ancient dragon, so perhaps she would have refused to leave at all.

If that had happened, Inglis would have had to finish Tiffanyer off forcefully—if she had done so, and then been forced to deal with the unexpectedly awakened dragon while exhausted, it would have been nothing short of a crisis. Therefore, the best choice at the time had been to come to an agreement with Harim, who seemed to prioritize Tiffanyer's safety, while the hial menace was not a thorn in their side.

Additionally, she could pursue the ancient dragon rather than emptying Leclair's stores. That way, she could both fight the dragon without Tiffanyer's interference and enjoy dragon meat, which was supposed to be delicious. Inglis had already planned this out before the negotiations.

Thanks to the dragon's continued slumber, Inglis had taken half a day to recover from her fatigue. With one night's sleep, she'd be back to peak performance. Her concerns had turned out to be unnecessary, but she'd had no way of knowing ahead of time. Inglis was glad she'd made the decision she had.

"We'll resolve this food shortage right here. Plus, if everyone can see Lahti involved, it'll improve his popularity even more. It's too early to leave, because he has one more grand accomplishment here," Inglis explained.

She needed to make sure that Lahti got the credit and the acclaim. Having it forced on her instead would be trouble.

"I-I see! So that's what you were thinking. Forgive me, I didn't realize you'd put so much thought into it." Lewin bowed his head, suddenly seeing Inglis in a new light.

Rafinha, a twinkle in her eye, was even more enthusiastic. "That sounds great! Good job, Chris! Turns out you care about more than tasty food! You're so grown-up!" Rafinha hugged Inglis and patted her on the head.

Inglis was pleased so long as Rafinha was happy, but... "Wait,

Rani, why are you responding like that now? I thought you went along with it because you knew.”

“Huh? Nah, there’s just no arguing with you when you’re hungry. And besides, I’ve got an empty tummy too...” Rafinha giggled and stuck out her tongue. It was an obvious excuse, but from the perspective of an ersatz grandparent, a forgivably adorable one.

Remaining silent, Inglis turned her gaze to Leone and Liselotte.

“That sounds great! It’s a really good idea!” Leone beamed, proud of Inglis.

“Yes, it sounds wonderful,” Liselotte agreed.

From what Inglis could tell, no one had understood her intentions at first. How depressing. Just what did they think of her normally? “Anyway, that’s what I’ve got planned. Please make me that outfit when you can.”

“Got it!” Rafinha replied. “That makes me even more motivated!”

“Let me help too!” Pullum said. “I’m sure I’ll be able to help out somehow.”

“Thanks, Pullum! Let’s get started then!” Rafinha said, full of cheer.

“I should get something to eat before the fight...” Inglis said. The Flygear Port still had a little bit of food left on it. With all the meat that would be coming from the ancient dragon, surely it was fine to finish off what they had. Staying hungry for too long would leave her unable to show her full power.

“No fair, Chris! I’m hungry too! Don’t take it all for yourself!”

“But you need to get to sewing in a hurry...”

“My hands shake when I’m hungry! I won’t be able to sew anything nice! I don’t want to make anything you’d be embarrassed to wear, so I need to eat first!”

Pullum laughed. “Then I’ll get started, Rafinha. You go ahead and eat.”

“Okay! Thanks, Pullum.”

“In that case...” Inglis began.

“Leone, could you make us something?” Inglis and Rafinha intoned in unison, with wide smiles.

“You’re always so quick to ask me to do it...” Leone grumbled.

“It’s because you make such tasty food,” the two replied.

“Well, that’s nice to hear, but... Okay. Just hold on a minute.”

Doubt crossed Lewin’s face again as he watched the girls. He turned to Lahti. “Er, Prince Lahti... Is it really a good idea to leave such dangerous matters to these ladies? They seem like normal girls... Cute, of course, but can spindly little things like them take on a dragon?”

“Hm? They’ll be fine. You won’t be seeing them in that light for

long.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Once you see them eat, you won’t think they’re cute. Once you see them fight, you won’t think they’re spindly. Inglis chased off a hialar menace basically on her own, right? If she can’t do anything about a dragon, there isn’t anyone in this country who can.”

“Sh-She’s that strong?” Lewin gasped.

“Listen, Lahti, I don’t know what you mean by that, but I haven’t forgotten what you promised before we came to Leclair!” Rafinha interjected. “There’s plenty of time while we wait for dinner, so now’s your chance! Come over here and say it!”

Before they’d traveled to Leclair from the other Alcardian towns, Lahti had said that he wouldn’t hesitate to use his power as king to protect Pullum. The girl had been left in a tenuous position by her brother’s betrayal to side with Tiffanyer. At the time, Rafinha and the other girls had gotten excited over the idea that he would—for example—rescue Pullum and then propose to her. Rafinha was excited to bring that back up.

“That’s absurd! This isn’t the time! Not until we deal with this mess completely! And don’t use such a significant thing as small talk while you wait for dinner!”

“Whaaat? But you promised!” she whined.

“I didn’t promise anything like *that* to begin with!”

“What are you talking about? It sounds like fun,” Pullum interjected.

“Whoa, it’s nothing, absolutely nothing! Hurry up and get Inglis’s outfit made! We don’t have any time to waste!” Flustered, Lahti changed the subject.



And finally...

“Wow, it looks great! Chris, you’re adorable! It’s perfect on you! You can work any outfit, so it’s really worth making things for you to wear.”

Rafinha, dark circles under her eyes, held up a hand mirror reflecting Inglis. As stern and dignified as the priestess’s outfit itself was, the amount of skin visible around her shoulders and cleavage exuded exactly the opposite sort of glamor. To sum it up, Inglis was fascinatingly attractive. She only wished she had a bigger mirror to fully enjoy the view in.

“It really is,” Pullum agreed, just as exhausted as Rafinha. “Her skin’s so clear, and her chest... I wish mine were like that.” No matter how tired she was, the gleam in her eyes was obvious.

“Why not take the chance to see how it feels? It’s so soft and

supple.” Rafinha poked at Inglis.

“Knock it off, Rani...! Don’t just go around poking at people’s chests!” Inglis protested.

“I deserve it after working myself to the bone for this. You’re paying me back with your body.”

“Agh!”

“C’mon, Pullum,” Rafinha continued. “Go ahead and touch! It’s fine.”

“O-Okay, just to see what it feels like... Wow, this is amazing! She really is soft and supple.”

“Ugh... Isn’t that enough?” Inglis complained. “Come on, this is embarrassing.”

“How about you, Liselotte?” Rafinha asked. “You can touch all you want.”

The group was inside a tent on the Flygear Port’s deck. Inglis, Rafinha, Pullum, Leone, and Liselotte were using it as their sleeping arrangements. Lahti and Lewin, as well as the other knights of Alcard and the civilian survivors, each had their own tents. The deep, round hull and spacious deck of a Flygear Port were designed to allow a large number of people to rest safely in the air. It could operate as a mobile base for dozens of troops.

In any case, Liselotte cleared her throat in response to Rafinha’s invitation. “That’s rather immodest. I don’t approve.”

Liselotte was a lady of class—in more ways than one, Inglis thought. Though that social position also applied to the *least* modest among them: a certain Lady Bilford.

Thank goodness. That should change the course of the conversation.

Liselotte continued after a pause. “But if you insist... It is educational to study what one doesn’t have.”

“Even you, Liselotte?!” Inglis protested. Rafinha and Pullum were slender, and not particularly well endowed. Liselotte’s build was average. But it seemed she still harbored some curiosity.

“Then go riiight ahead! ♪” Rafinha announced. “C’mon, they’re jiggle!”

“Wow, they’re so heavy. Amazing.”

There was only one person Inglis could look to in this situation. “Save me, Leone!”

“Aha ha... Do your best...” Leone had taken shelter in the far corner of the tent to protect herself, defensively covering her chest with her arms. She knew that she was the next target.

“Leone! How cruel!”

“C’mon, I’ve got Rin to deal with over here!” Rin had set up camp in Leone’s cleavage, so in a sense Leone was at least holding her off. Otherwise, the tiny magicite beast would have joined in as well.

“C’mon, if you keep looking away, I’m going to squeeze them more,” Rafinha taunted.

“Eek! Stop touching them like that!” Inglis protested. “Isn’t that enough?! I need to get to the dragon!”

“Hmm, I guess we can stop. We’ve enjoyed Chris’s springiness plenty.” With Rafinha’s announcement, the three’s attacks ceased.

“Yes,” Pullum agreed. “It was incredible. I really am jealous.”

“I learned quite a bit,” Liselotte remarked.

“Phew, it’s finally over... Anyway, enough playing around. I’m going to where that dragon is now,” Inglis announced. “Rani, Pullum, you must be tired. You can rest.”

“No, I’ll go too,” Rafinha said. “We’re going to be eating tasty dragon meat, right? I don’t want to sleep through that!”

“I want to do anything I can to help too!” Pullum agreed. “If there’s anything I can do to help the people my brother took food from...!”

“Then let’s go together! That’ll be nice, right, Chris?!”

“Yes,” Inglis agreed. “There’s a favor I wanted from you two anyway...”

“Of course, we’ll help too,” Leone announced.

“Indeed we will. Let’s all go together,” Liselotte agreed.

Inglis and the others left their tent and boarded their Flygears, ready to descend to the ruins of Leclair where the ancient dragon’s tail protruded from the ground.



Three Flygears took off from the deck of the Flygear Port. The *Star Princess* carried Inglis and Rafinha; the other two were part of the ship’s complement, carrying Leone and Liselotte, and Lahti and Pullum, respectively.

In truth, it would have been better for Lahti to stay behind on the Flygear Port, but he simply wouldn’t hear of it. Both a sense of responsibility as the nominal commander of the expedition and concern for Pullum had played a part in his participation.

“Why don’t we land some distance from the dragon and walk the rest? It might be dangerous if we approach him suddenly,” Inglis suggested. She brought the *Star Princess* to the ground a safe distance from the protruding tail.

“But why so far away, Chris?” Rafinha asked as they walked to the dragon’s tail.

“To be prepared if it suddenly leaps from the ground and attacks us?” Leone pondered.

Leone’s observation wasn’t wrong, but that wasn’t the only thing about which they needed to remain cautious—there was an entirely

different thing one also needed to keep in mind when dealing with an ancient dragon.

“A dragon strong enough to be called an ancient dragon turns the very energy around itself into guardians—they’re called phantasms, or projections,” Inglis explained.

The power around a dragon was something different from mana or magic, and its effects were stronger than all-too-inefficient magic. The flames or blizzard that a dragon breathed forth required none of the chanting or gestures of magic, yet they possessed far more power. However, unlike magic which shared some common traits, dragons’ power varied greatly from one to the next. Their power was less a science and more individual traits.

“And you want to be on guard for those?” Leone asked.

“Yes. If we approach suddenly, the guardians might surround us and destroy our Flygears.” Inglis wouldn’t regret things coming to blows, but losing their Flygears in the process could cause some inconveniences.

“I’ve never heard that about dragons before,” Leone remarked. “You sure know a lot, Inglis.”

“I hadn’t heard such a thing either,” Liselotte agreed. “You must have read quite the rare book.”

“Is there really a book like that in Ymir’s archives?” Rafinha asked. “I don’t remember seeing one.”

“There have to be plenty of books you wouldn’t know, Rani,” Inglis replied. “You’re not much of a reader.”

“Oh, whatever! I may not have read them, but I played enough hide-and-seek in there that I’d at least remember the covers. Hmm...”

“Maybe you should try opening them?” Inglis responded.

In fact, there was no such book. Inglis’s knowledge came from her past life as King Inglis. Some rare books during that period had indeed documented dragons, and people had still known of them. But judging from Leone’s and Liselotte’s reactions, dragons had been completely forgotten in the modern world. The same was true of mana, and the knowledge and techniques of magic used to control it.

“You two are going back home next vacation at the academy, right?” Leone asked. “Can you bring that book with you and show it to me? I’m curious.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Liselotte agreed. “I’d like to see it as well.”

Their passion for learning was commendable, but Inglis would have preferred this in any other context. “Well, um...” Inglis began, but stopped herself as pale blue patches of mist blocked their path. “Ah, be careful. They’re coming.”

“Grrr...”

“Gwohhh!”

They loomed threateningly, taking the form of dragons’ heads. Each radiated a malevolence thick enough that even a well-trained knight might have lost his will to fight. When Inglis had fought an ancient dragon in a previous life, more than a few had thrown down their arms in terror.

“What are those?!” Rafinha gasped.

“Th-They’re not to be trifled with. Compared to a magicite beast...” Leone trailed off.

“Yes... This is far worse than facing a magicite beast. This intense malevolence, this hostility!” Liselotte said.

That trio usually seemed like a group of ordinary girls, but they were more than that. Not only were they well trained, they were future upper-class knights. They may have been startled by the sudden apparitions, but they weren’t shaken to the core. Their determination was reliable.

They were no Silva, who had a special-class Rune, or Yua, who was her own thing entirely, but they were still plenty powerful. If they’d been under Inglis’s command in her past life, she’d have expected fine work from them.

“More and more are appearing!” Pullum shouted.

Before Inglis’s eyes, the phantoms appeared and gathered, almost forming a wall.

“These are phantasms, physical manifestations of a dragon’s energy. They’re transparent, but they bite—and it’ll hurt, so be careful. They’re watching us now, but if we step within a certain area, they’ll attack,” Inglis explained.

“The pain itself would be the least of our problems!” Rafinha said.

Leone eyed them. “Right. With their strength...”

“Inglis made the correct call earlier,” Liselotte said. “If we had approached suddenly, we would have lost our Flygears and had nowhere to escape to.”

“You all wait here,” Inglis instructed. “I’ll approach them. If this outfit is effective, they won’t attack.”

In her previous life, she’d seen an ancient dragon’s phantasms avoid harming a priestess. If the two here didn’t lunge at Inglis, she could presume that she’d be able to communicate with the ancient dragon Fufailbane. She wanted that very much.

She tested the phantasms first. “Here I go.”

“You’re probably going to be disappointed if you don’t get to fight them, Chris,” Rafinha remarked.

“No, that would be fine. Besides, I could take a break to change so

that they'd attack me."

"Aha ha ha... What a shocker..."

"Wouldn't it be great to have foes I could fight endlessly? Looks like I've stumbled upon something truly valuable. ♪"

"That sounds like the kind of longing that should be left to tasty food and cute clothes..." Rafinha sighed deeply.

"C'mon, c'mon! This kind of thing is really dangerous. Shouldn't we deal with it?" Lahti complained in a serious manner, unlike Rafinha's teasing of her cousin.

"Sure. So can I take it home with me?" Inglis asked.

"Fine, whatever. You do you."

"Come on, Chris!" Rafinha protested, pulling on Inglis's ears. "You can't treat it like a pet! Whether it's to the capital or Ymir, wherever you bring it, it'll make a mess!"

"Owwwww... Okay, okay! I'll think of a way to keep that from happening! But even though it'd be a shame to kill him off, moving the ancient dragon himself somewhere else would definitely be for the best. Alcard's probably so cold because he's buried here."

"Wait, what?! It can even change the climate?!" Lahti asked, shocked.

"Going by the amount of power that he has, it's definitely possible. You'll see when we move him. I'm pretty sure the temperature will get warmer." Inglis had deliberately left matters unclear, but in her past life she had actually seen a region chill due to the influence of an ancient dragon. She was almost certain the same applied here.

"So our land being frozen and barren, making it hard on crops... That won't be a problem?" Lahti asked.

"Will we finally have bountiful harvests, no longer struggling to come up with offerings for Highland? We'll get plenty of powerful Artifacts, and even a hialar menace like Eris or Ripple who actually protects the country?" Pullum continued. They were both quite excited.

"Nothing like the magicite beast destroying Leclair will ever happen again..."

"It won't happen. We won't let it happen! At least we'll be able to secure the means to ensure that!"

The town of Leclair was now nothing but a pit with an ancient dragon's tail, and this was after a magicite beast had already laid waste to it. Had that not happened, the king of Alcard might not have changed his policies and needed to reinforce the country's defenses against magicite beasts. Perhaps then he wouldn't have needed to work with a Highland commander—Archlord Evel—to obtain more powerful Artifacts and a hialar menace. After all, he didn't have the

goods to offer in return.

Evel had been the one to suggest Alcard attack Karelia, Inglis's country, when Venefic had made its move. His hand had been forced.

However, before the operation was completed, Evel visited the royal palace in Karelia personally, just to be killed by the Steelblood Front leader who cryptically wore a black mask.

After that, Tiffanyer arrived in Alcard as Evel's successor to plunder the countryside and turn the ruins of Leclair into a prison. She activated the Floating Circle planted there, and she carried the entire town itself away to Highland.

Those were the events up to this point—but the initial trigger had been the powerful magicite beast destroying Leclair. To counter that, it was definitely necessary to enhance the country's defenses. And there was no straightforward way to do so.

But what if the climate in Alcard changed, and the harvests became more prosperous? Then it would only be a matter of making a straightforward exchange with Highland, rather than joining in the war with Karelia. It would solve the root causes of Alcard's problems.

"So then we have to!" Rafinha said. "Then Alcard won't have to attack Karelia!"

"Agreed," Leone said. "Rafinha's right. It would be a fundamental solution to the problem."

"A ray of hope!" Liselotte added.

Recent events might lead to a break in relations between Alcard and Highland's Papal League, but the Triumvirate would be willing to make a deal—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Ambassador Theodore would be willing to make a deal. That unfortunately brought forth a concern for Inglis: that would make Rafinha even more fond of the man.

"Anyway, before that, we have matters to attend to." Inglis clapped her fist into her palm and stepped toward the gathering phantasms.

"She really does want us to eat the dragon, doesn't she?" Leone muttered.

"Not just us! It's for everyone!" Rafinha said.

"But she wants to enjoy herself until she's satisfied first, I guess?" Liselotte asked.

Inglis smiled at the others. "I suppose all of these reasons are correct."

"Aha ha..." Rafinha laughed weakly. "Then it would be better to at least apologize first for once."

"Yeah... You're going to have a really hard time if you take them all on at once—or at least it *should* be hard." Leone nodded.

"When you think about it calmly, what's appropriate has become

unclear,” Liselotte bemoaned.

“With that said, I’m off.” Inglis paced steadily toward the phantasms.

“Grrr...”

“Gwohhh!”

As she approached without concern, the phantasms bared their fangs menacingly. Their aggression was enough to make the air around them shudder. Inglis recognized the smell of an enjoyable battlefield to come. This was nothing more than an involuntary physiological phenomenon of the dragon, yet it was so forceful. Even though the dragon itself slumbered beneath the ground, Inglis felt the same strength from the phantasms as when she’d fought them in her previous life.

Inglis laughed. “I’m glad you’ve all been well.” Her face broke into a smile. She released the gravity-enhancing magic she normally kept on herself. The desire to simply rush into the midst of the phantasms and enjoy a good fistfight as a warm-up burned inside her—but in the meantime, she’d wait. She still needed to test whether the priestess’s habit would let her communicate with the ancient dragon. That was why she’d released the gravity magic.

“For now, let’s just have a little talk.” Inglis converted aether to mana and wrapped it around herself. More precisely, it permeated the priestess’s habit she wore. Its wavelength was very similar to that of the ice sword she used often, one of frost.

The habit of the priestess she’d seen in her past life had implemented strong mana into the clothing’s fibers. The surface was once able to create such things using rare materials. In contrast, her current outfit was made of nothing more than cloth.

Ever the fan of dressing up Inglis, Rafinha sometimes made her clothes or accessories. If Rafinha hadn’t made plans to become a knight, she said she would have liked to have become a seamstress and opened her own shop. Coincidentally, Rafinha had bought the bolts of fabric while shopping for their expedition simply because she’d liked the color.

But the outfit Rafinha had sewn could be more than just cloth if Inglis deliberately channeled mana into it. Her clothing began to glow faintly with mana.

“Grrr!”

“Raaah!”

“Ooo...”

The phantasms quieted, parting to open a path for Inglis.
“Oh?” she muttered.

The habit was having the intended effect. Even as she passed between them, they only watched from a distance.



“All right! It looks like we did it!” Rafinha announced happily.

“Our hard work paid off!” Pullum agreed.

“They’ll attack if we all go in, so please wait here while I make my approach alone,” Inglis said.

“Be careful, Chris.”

“Yeah, I will. Don’t worry.”

Leaving them with those words, Inglis pressed on toward the ancient dragon’s tail, which towered like a tremendous tree. The phantasms continued to spring into existence, increasing more and more in number, but they did not attack her.

The effect of the priestess’s habit was extraordinary. The movement of the phantasms was perfectly coordinated. None rushed forward to attack her. Silence hung in the air.

That was a bit boring, honestly. She’d hoped for at least a small fight before the ancient dragon. The phantasms weren’t about to accommodate that desire. Perhaps because they weren’t complete life-forms on their own, she couldn’t sense any individuality. Nonetheless, they were stronger than an average knight or magicite beast.

She was itching for combat—they were right there in front of her—but Inglis knew that she needed to prioritize communicating with the ancient dragon. She understood that, but the logic didn’t shake her desire to fight the phantasms. As foes she had faced in her previous life, they would serve as a perfect measure for how she’d developed, reborn as Inglis Eucus. Surrounded by them, she wanted to release the mana which had permeated her priestess’s habit so that they’d descend upon her.

She couldn’t stop herself from wanting it. It was like hunger pangs. “Ah, such a shame...”

“Grrr?”

“Raaah?”

“Gwooooh?”

The phantasms made the same noises as before but with a touch of bewilderment this time as they watched Inglis stare at them longingly.

Inglis muttered to herself, “I’ll just pretend they’re not there,” as she redirected her attention to the ground in front of her, trying not to see the phantasms as she advanced. The sight of them was too tempting.

Fortunately—or *unfortunately*—Inglis arrived unimpeded at the ancient dragon’s tail. It was the size of a gigantic tree, covered with sharp, spiky scales of an icy silver sheen and emitting pale clouds of

frosty air. The air itself was freezing, and tiny glittering crystals floated around the area.

Inglis involuntarily shivered. It was cold enough that if she stayed too long, she might get hypothermia. After all, she was clad only in the thin habit of a priestess.

The blistering cold which stung her skin was proof that the ancient dragon Fufailbane still lived—as were the phantasms, but she was thankful that the dragon himself was still well. That meant there would be value in fighting him. A conversation had to be the first order of business, but when they had a chance to fight later, she could enjoy it knowing that his long sleep hadn't put him in poor shape.

“But...”

One concern of hers still remained. He was an ancient dragon; there was no way she'd stepped so close to him without his noticing. How could he allow himself to be approached so casually, with no warning or call? Had he called out, and she had simply not heard it? That would be odd, considering the habit's clear effect on the phantasms showed it should have been working.

There was no point in overthinking it. Inglis decided to call out to him. “O ancient dragon Fufailbane... Can you hear my voice?”

She waited a good ten seconds, but there was no response.

“Hmm?” Crooking her neck, Inglis moved even closer to the tail. This time, she touched it directly, further increasing the mana permeating her outfit. “Ancient dragon, can you hear me? If you can, please respond.”

Still, there was only silence.

“Huh? Hmm...” He was definitely alive. She could keenly sense his power, as mighty as ever. But as casually as she'd approached, he didn't respond—didn't call out. The habit should have allowed her to communicate with him, so what was going on?

“Are you asleep, by any chance?” To use a human analogy, he was in a doze, where his body was active but his consciousness hadn't yet awakened. She wasn't enough of an expert on the physiology of ancient dragons to know how long their slumber might last.

Perhaps he would wake soon, or maybe it was going to take years, or even decades. Of course, she couldn't wait that long. She wanted to talk about the past and battle to the utmost of her potential—plus, she was hungry. In terms of securing food, it wasn't just for the sake of her and her friends, but for that of the people of Alcard.

That left her with only one course of action.

“I apologize for my rudeness, but I'm going to have to beat you awake.”

Inglis turned to where she expected the ancient dragon's face to be and bowed. Then she bent her legs into a crouch, swung her hips

low, and with a big shout, she kicked with all her might.

Clanggg!

A dragon's scales were harder than steel, and they rang loudly like metal as they received Inglis's strike, but they weren't even scratched, although they shifted slightly from the blow. Instead, the hem of her priestess's habit which had brushed against the scales immediately began to freeze.

"Huh? Oh, whoops!" She didn't want to ruin the priestess's habit which she'd just had Rafinha make for her. She'd planned to bring it back in perfect condition to the knights' academy and keep it as a treasure. Of course she treasured it; this granddaughter-like figure had made it especially for her. She wanted to wear it occasionally when she was alone and enjoy her reflection in the mirror.

Inglis stepped back to gain some distance from the tail. She watched for any movement—but the dragon was quiet, as if she'd done nothing.

She chuckled. "I figured that wouldn't be enough." Even though she'd released the gravity-enhancing magic she kept on herself to train, the kick had merely been a standard strike, not one powered by aether. Between the robustness of Fufailbane's scales and the great mass involved, her strike may as well have been a weak breeze against him.

She hadn't captured his attention yet, but that was fine. That was the ancient dragon Fufailbane. Even in her previous life, he had been strong enough that she hadn't been able to defeat him alone.

"In that case..." *Time to use Aether Shell!* "One more time!"

Blammmmmmm!

The result was an impact many times more intense than the previous. A loud reverberation filled the air. The ancient dragon's tail bent back and whipped into the ground, leaving a mark. That was how much stronger Inglis was with that technique. However, the tail of the ancient dragon returned to its former position as if nothing had happened, and there was no sign that she had harmed him. There was maybe a small dent she could see if she squinted, but as she watched, even that seemed to heal. The dragon's strength, flexibility, and resilience were fearsome.

"Aha ha... Ha ha ha ha..." Without realizing it, Inglis began to laugh. This would be a wonderful way to push her limits. Perhaps the best she'd ever had in her life as Inglis Eucus.

So what should I do next...?

“Graaaa!”

“Gwoooo!”

“Grooooowr!”

“Hm?!”

While the ancient dragon himself still didn’t respond, the phantasms around her did, unable to ignore her actions any longer. More than ten attacked her at once. Well, she had wanted a fight.

“Thank you! I appreciate it!” Inglis released Aether Shell and returned to her unenhanced form. Simply crushing her foes would be a waste. She wished to come out of every fight having grown from it—so deciding not to use Aether Shell was a foregone conclusion.

The phantasms spread out all around her, their large jaws gnashing for her flesh.

The three coming from my right are closest! “Haaaah!” Inglis twisted in that direction and leaped straight toward them, punching with her right fist at the lead phantasm.

Thud!

The strike, carrying the momentum of her leap, made the phantasm burst into nothingness.

Left punch for the second!

Thud!

It burst as well, and then the third was upon her. After her left punch, she shifted her hips down, keeping her body low. “How adorable! They pop from my fists!”

She rose, swinging as if she were scooping something up. The third, hit directly, also burst. Inglis flew into the air, moving to attack and evade at the same time.

“Groarrrrr!”

The snapping phantasms from the other directions bit through where she’d been, gouging at the ground. Each had a bite so forceful that it could easily snap through a human body. Because they could be damaged by physical blows, they were more fragile than a magicite beast, but their offensive power surpassed that of magicite beasts of similar size.

“But more importantly...”

Clink!

As Inglis muttered to herself, she transformed aether into mana in her hand, manifesting a magical blade of ice. A bit of practice with a sword from time to time wasn't a bad thing. Using the momentum of her fall, she aimed a flurry of thrusts at the clump of phantasms that had formed.

Slash, slash, slash, slash!

The hail of thrusts rained down on the attacking phantasms, wiping them out. Roars immediately rang out as more appeared from somewhere, surrounding Inglis again.

"No matter how many I defeat, more spring up! It's wonderful!"

This was beyond the ability of magicite beasts. If the Prism Flow wasn't falling, magicite beasts weren't created. However, phantasms weren't limited by such natural phenomena. As long as the ancient dragon survived, she could fight them whenever she wanted. There couldn't have been a more convenient foe.

If she could have it her way, she'd prefer that they were a little stronger individually, but if she crammed several into one place and tried to compress them, they might be able to merge. There was room to experiment.

Nonetheless, they were excellent training partners for Inglis. She was so happy that her expression loosened into a grin without her noticing. "Come on, now, play with me a little more!" Inglis rushed forward and took a running leap, delivering a flying kick to a phantasm high in the air. "Haaaah!"

Thud!

The phantasm burst. Using the recoil, she flew higher. The movement of the phantasms, which constantly replenished their numbers as they tried to surround her, delivered constant footholds in the air for Inglis. She jump-kicked from one to the other, using the recoil to soar even higher.

Thud! Thud, thud, thud! Thud!

Finally, at the apex of her combined leaps, she did a double somersault in the air and landed.

"I'm back!" She touched down just outside of the area of the phantasms—meaning directly in front of Rafinha and the others.

"W-Welcome back... You seem like you had fun. What are we going to do with you, Chris?" Rafinha sighed.

"That was incredible, Inglis!" Pullum remarked. "I was watching

you closely, but you were so fast, I lost track!”

“I shouldn’t just stand here admiring it—but it was an excellent display of your prowess,” Liselotte said.

“Yes, but the more I watch, the more I realize I’ll never be able to match Inglis...” Leone bemoaned.

“If you all practice every day, you’ll be able to! The phantasms are great. No matter how many you take down they keep coming, and they’re worthwhile foes. They’re the best training partners!”

Inglis’s excited ravings didn’t please Rafinha, though. “Hey, wait! Hold it right there, Chris. It’s nice that you’re having a great time, but wasn’t there something else you were supposed to do? Did you hear the dragon? I saw you kick its tail, but...”

“Oh, right, that. I think it’s still asleep... I kicked it to try and wake it up, but it didn’t seem to work. And then the phantasms responded—”

“And you had fun fighting them?”

“Yeah. Foes you can fight forever are great!” Inglis gave a vigorous nod, her eyes gleaming.

“Well, that’s definitely the sort of thing you’re into...but nothing else happened?”

“Well... I found out that the ancient dragon’s definitely sleeping, so there’s something I’d like to ask you to help me with...” That was why she’d come back while kicking the phantasms.

“Huh? What are you planning, Chris?”

“Our next move, of course.”

“Next move?”

“Yeah. Getting food.” Inglis grinned.

“That’s what I was waiting for! So, what do we do?” Rafinha’s eyes sparkled.

Chapter II: Inglis, Age 15—The Ancient Dragon and the (Former) Old King (2)

“All right. First, watch this,” Inglis said before thrusting her right palm toward the ancient dragon’s tail, which towered over the crater that had been Leclair. As the others watched, a pale blue glow condensed into a ball of light.

“Huh?! Uh, w-wait a sec, Chris!” Rafinha called out in panic, but it was too late.

Aether Strike! Inglis ignored her and fired the mass of condensed aether.

Blammmmmmm!

“Aaaaah!” Rafinha shrieked in horror, grabbing Inglis by the base of the neck and shaking her. “I-If you shoot it with that thing, you’ll blow away our precious dragon meat! Don’t waste it!”

“C-Calm down...! That hurts! It’s okay, Rani!”

“Huh?”

“Look. See?”

Krrshsh!

The Aether Strike striking the dragon’s tail made a loud grinding sound. Inglis’s attack struggled against the dragon’s sturdy scales for a while, but that could go on for only so long.

Crackle!

The blast bounced back, disappearing into the yonder.

“See? It’s fine,” Inglis pointed out.

The scales themselves were slightly damaged, and some of the flesh beneath them was exposed, but it was intact—a minor injury, then. Inglis had predicted as much from her previous strike on the tail with Aether Shell active.

“Wh—?! Chris, your attack bounced off!” Rafinha shouted.

That wasn’t the only thing that happened.

“Ah! The phantasms are—?!” Rafinha gasped as a number of phantasms gathered at the point where the Aether Strike had connected. They disappeared—as if the wound sucked them in. The wound then recovered to its original state as the group watched. “It heals so quickly!”

Phantasms were suborganisms that sprang forth from a dragon’s aura. By absorbing them, a dragon could increase its healing even more. Fufailbane himself seemed to still slumber, so it was probably an instinctive reaction.

“So its wounds heal right away!” Liselotte remarked.

Inglis was positively giddy. “See? Isn’t he amazing? Isn’t he so strong? Just watching makes me excited!”

“Ha ha... I’m not sure you should find it *exciting*...” Rafinha sighed in exasperation.

“Th-That’s right!” Pullum cut in. “If not even Inglis can hurt it, won’t it be bad news if it wakes up?!” She was surveying the situation quite seriously.

“Y-Yeah! That thing’s trouble!” Lahti was equally concerned. It was a shock seeing Aether Strike be repelled.

“Well, is it, Chris?” Rafinha pressed.

“Well, I wouldn’t say it’ll pose a huge problem.”

“I guess so. If it really were that bad, you would be all hyped up to protect me. Just like you were with Tiffany.”

“Of course. I’m your squire, after all.”

Rafinha chuckled. “I was honestly a little scared, but it was nice to see how serious you got.”

“You’re welcome.” Inglis returned Rafinha’s smile.

“My take is that we’ll be fine! It seems like Inglis has more options to work with than she did then,” Rafinha remarked to the others.

“Ha ha ha... You sound pretty proud of that,” Leone said, poking fun at them.

“Well, Inglis still has a technique better than that one, doesn’t she?”

“Indeed,” Liselotte said. “Recall how she vanquished the Prismar in one blow when it appeared while we were defending Ripple. That one is on a completely different level.”

Leone and Liselotte seemed just as unperturbed as Rafinha. They had all seen Inglis use Aether Breaker. So, knowing she still had something even better to bring forth, they could stay calm. Pullum and Lahti hadn’t been present, since they’d been on an urgent mission to Ambassador Theodore at the time.

“Well, there’s a bit of a problem with that...” Inglis trailed off.

“Huh?” The others crooked their necks in confusion.

“Actually, I’m going to need your help with this one. It’s like

this...”

And so Inglis laid out the plan for Rafinha and the others over a short while.

“Okay, let’s go over this again to be sure. I’m going to... And then like this... Like that...” Inglis went over the details for everyone once more.

“Right, right! Okay, got it!” Rafinha nodded as Inglis explained the steps they’d be taking.

“Yes, I understand now. Let’s give it a try,” Leone said.

“If this goes well, we’ll be able to obtain all the food we need in one go,” Liselotte noted.

“That thing’s huge. I wonder how many servings we’ll get?” Lahti asked.

“Let’s do it! I-I’ll do my best!” Pullum said.

No one seemed to have any objections, so Rafinha boarded the *Star Princess* and called out to the group. “All right, then. We’re over here, Leone, Pullum!”

They were the first group, taking the *Star Princess*. Leone gripped the controls, while Rafinha and Pullum sat beside her. Of course, there were reasons why this was the most appropriate formation. In terms of piloting skills, Inglis would have preferred to have Lahti at the controls, but the Flygear could only seat three at a time, so someone else needed to fly as well.

Lahti took the controls of another Flygear, which Inglis and Liselotte boarded. The third remained parked for now.

Whirr...

Vwooom!

The two Flygears, three aboard each, lifted into the sky.

“Here we go! Everyone ready?” Leone called out.

“Yeah!” When everyone nodded, the two Flygears suddenly accelerated, crossing the threshold into where the dragon energy materialized. They were in the phantasms’ territory now.

“Gworr!” The phantasms responded immediately, endless numbers of them swarming. As long as the Flygears moved at full speed, they couldn’t be surrounded, but they still needed to intercept any phantasms which blocked their paths.

“Pullum! We’re counting on you!” Liselotte shouted.

“Yes! Leave it to me!” Pullum replied. She took out her Artifact; rather than a weapon, it was a glittering silver harp. As the melody she played on it filled the air, a veil of light settled over the Artifacts of Liselotte and Rafinha. The harp’s melody enhanced other Artifacts nearby.

“Moving to intercept!” Liselotte activated her halberd Artifact’s Gift, and its usual white wings were tinged golden by the effect of Pullum’s Gift. They flapped out forcefully, and in the blink of an eye, she flew into the midst of the phantasms.

“Yaaaaaah!” The thrusting tip of her halberd pierced several of the manifestations.

The remainder of the group scattered in all directions before converging again on her.

While the slightest mistake on Liselotte’s part could be costly, Inglis stayed put. She’d be acting individually later, and it would be necessary to have the others hold back the phantasms then. She wasn’t particularly worried, but she couldn’t let anything happen to Rafinha and the others. So it was best to think of this as a rehearsal, interfering only if it was absolutely necessary.

“You’re far too slow!” Liselotte’s wings flapped again. The way she flew through the air while swiping the head of her halberd through the scattered foes was beautiful, as if she was tracing the curve of the full moon, about to make a full circle midair.

“Hmm?” As far as Inglis knew, Liselotte’s Gift of flight only worked in a straight line. Yet here she was forming a beautiful arc, making it effective against scattered enemies. It was faster and left fewer openings for counterattack compared to charging in a straight line at each individual phantasm, slowing in between to change direction.

With one flowing blow, she cut down the phantasms to her side, and her follow-up annihilated those above and below. The path before the two Flygears lay completely open, and they slid through the gap, overtaking Liselotte from below.

“Nice, Liselotte!” Rafinha cheered her on.

“Don’t get ahead of her! Slow down a little so that we don’t get separated!” Lahti instructed. They needed to safely recover Liselotte; they couldn’t leave her behind.

“Right!” Leone nodded as she gripped the controls.

“That isn’t necessary. You needn’t worry for my sake.” Liselotte had already caught up and grasped onto the hull of the Flygear.

“Whoa, that was quick!” Lahti gasped.

“Well, if I took my time, they’d just gather again, would they not?”

“You’ve gotten better, haven’t you, Liselotte?” Inglis asked.

“It’s thanks to Pullum. My power and speed are simply incomparable to the usual.”

“But flying in an arc took practice, didn’t it? That wasn’t from Pullum’s Artifact. It was all you.”

Liselotte chuckled. “I suppose, if you say so. Why, thank you.”

Just as Liselotte smiled, Lahti raised his voice. “More incoming!” They were definitely drawing closer to the ancient dragon’s tail now, but more phantasms rose to block their path.

“No matter how many times, the story will be the same!” Liselotte said.

“Wait! Leave it to me this time!” Rafinha stopped Liselotte and leaned over the railing of the *Star Princess*, drawing her trusty Artifact bow, Shiny Flow. An arrow of light easily double the normal size formed in her hand. “We’re hungry! Get out of the way!”

She let it loose. It was also much faster than usual, thanks to Pullum’s Gift. Rushing toward the clump of phantasms, it swallowed several in an instant. The phantasms reacted quickly, scattering to limit the damage—but Rafinha had seen that coming and had already prepared a response.

“You’re not getting away! Burst!” The arrow of light split into a rain of light and dispersed. That scattered cloud pierced the phantasms, wiping them out.

“Good job, Rafinha!” Leone said.

“Doing good, Rani. That’s the stuff.”

Rafinha normally puffed up in pride after such praise, but this time she didn’t respond.

“What’s wrong, Rani? Does your tummy hurt?”

“No! It’s just... It’s *different* with the support of Pullum’s Gift! I think I can do more! I’ve been waiting for this!” Rafinha’s eyes gleamed.

“Here come more! These things just don’t give up!” Lahti announced as he looked ahead.

“As long as the ancient dragon’s alive and well, they’ll keep coming forever— isn’t that great?” Inglis asked.

“C’mon, is this really the time to be overjoyed?!” Lahti replied.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got it! No matter how many times they come at us...” Rafinha again drew Shiny Flow and loosed an arrow of light. This time, it split immediately into countless smaller arrows and scattered, circling the hulls of each of the two Flygears as if to cover them. The light had formed a protective wall.

“Wow...” Inglis watched in awe. Previously, Rafinha had sent her countless arrows of light circling enemies to disrupt them, and now she had improved her precision enough to use them as a defensive wall while also moving them at high speed—the Flygears were still moving forward. This required much more difficult control than just encircling a still enemy.

“See? Now we can keep going with no worries! Let’s go!” Rafinha said.

“Got it!” Leone replied as she held the *Star Princess*’s controls.

“All right, here goes!” said Lahti from the other Flygear.

With walls of arrows of light around them, the Flygears pushed forward into the gathered phantasms. “Gyaaaahnnn!” they screeched.

Fwooooosh! Fwoosh! Fwooooosh!

The phantasms dissipated into nothingness as each arrow of light struck them.

This means Rafinha and the others will be safe. We can do this, Inglis thought. She turned to them and said, “Amazing, Rani! That’s really useful!”

Rafinha chuckled. “I told you. I can help out way more—thanks to Pullum.” This time, she did puff up in pride.



“Definitely. But more than that, I can tell your skills have improved as well.” Inglis smiled without meaning to, overjoyed at Rafinha’s self-improvement.

With this, Inglis felt that there wouldn’t be any problems even if she was separated from the group. They were almost directly before the ancient dragon’s tail. It was time for her to make her move. “Okay, it’s my turn now. Here I go! Leone, when I give the signal, you’re up.”

“Okay, I’ve got it! Leave it to me!” Leone replied.

“Now’s your chance, Chris! Go for it!” Rafinha changed the trajectory of her arrows of light, leaving a gap for Inglis to jump out through.

“Okay! Thanks!” Without hesitation, Inglis leaped from the Flygear. Before she even landed, she twisted in midair, gathering aether in her palm. Her aim was, of course, the towering tail of the ancient dragon Fufailbane.

“Go!”

Blammmmmmm!

The Aether Strike she shot from midair roared toward the treelike tail. Inglis followed it with her eyes as she fell. And as she landed, it struck the tail.

Crack!

The results were the same as before. Even though it left a small wound, the Aether Strike was repelled by the dragon’s exceptionally sturdy scales.

And that’s what I was planning on!

She’d had time to breathe after she fired off Aether Strike. That was enough of a pause to ready another aether technique.

Aether Shell!

Aether of a slightly different color than usual washed over Inglis as she leaped, the dirt and snow scattering around her feet with a booming sound. The next moment, she was in the path of the Aether Strike—it was directly in front of her face. She was already aiming a kick.

“Haaaah!”

Slam!

As Inglis’s kick flashed, the Aether Strike again suddenly reversed direction, flying toward Fufailbane’s tail again. This wasn’t Aether

Breaker, which layered aether on the same wavelength for explosive results, but rather the colliding wavelengths which repulsed each other to control the trajectory of Aether Strike. Inglis had used it recently when fighting the squad under Harim, Pullum's brother, and she'd taken a shine to it.

It may have looked like the ultimate show of brute force, simply manhandling Aether Strikes around, but it was actually a highly complex technique which required the ability to manipulate two wavelengths of aether which repulsed each other at once. It was proof that her manipulation over aether was improving. She'd decided it would come in handy here.

Maybe I'll call it "Aether Reflector," she thought.

Crack!

The Aether Strike impacted the dragon's scales, bouncing off yet again.

"Once more!" Inglis again got in the path of the projectile, and this time gave it a straight punch.

Slam! Crack!

It volleyed toward her, and she returned it with a palm strike.

Slaaam! Craaackkk!

"I can keep this going all day!" This time, she rushed toward it and sent an elbow strike its way.

Slaaam! Craaackkk!

This time, she met the blast of light, coming toward her at a steep angle, with a heel stomp. "Still not enough, huh!"

The blast of aether bounced back and forth between Inglis and the ancient dragon's tail. For Rafinha and the others, waiting in their Flygears, it was now moving too fast to follow with their eyes. It just seemed as though large and small lights were bouncing chaotically around the gigantic tail of the dragon. The roar of their impacts was like a storm.

"Inglis is amazing! I can't follow her at all! What's even going on?" Pullum asked.

"I've seen Chris use the same technique before, but now she's even sharper!" Rafinha exclaimed, proud.

"I wonder if she was holding back last time she used it," Leone

pondered.

“It was in town, so I suppose she was...” Liselotte said.

“But as incredible as Chris is when she gets serious, it’s also incredible how only *that* can hurt the dragon!”

“Yes, Inglis was right. It is on a level with a Prismer,” Leone said.

“But look! Its wound is opening further!” Liselotte exclaimed.

“Leone, I’ll take over the controls! It’s almost your turn!” Rafinha said.

“Okay! Thanks!” Leone gripped the hilt of her dark greatsword Artifact and put all her strength into it.

“All right, we’re about ready!” Inglis muttered.

With each impact, her projectile lost a little more power, but it left a deeper wound in Fufailbane’s tail. Even the shocking resilience of a divine dragon couldn’t stand up to the damage put out by Aether Reflector. The wound that was slowly being opened was concentrated at around a human’s height. There, the dragon’s scales were blown away, exposing the flesh beneath. Inglis was focusing on it with unparalleled accuracy. As the power of the aether she’d shot initially faded away, Fufailbane’s tail had a ring of injuries around it.

“All right!” This was what she’d been after. Now it was just a race against time before the phantasms gathered and helped heal the wound!

“Leone! Your turn!” Inglis looked up at the *Star Princess* hovering above and gave the signal.

Leone already had her greatsword Artifact at the ready, fully supported by Pullum’s harp. “Got it, Inglis!”

“Here we go! Booster mode!” Rafinha, at the controls, declared forcefully.

Whirrrrr!

The engines of the *Star Princess* roared. “Full speed ahead!” Rafinha pushed down hard on the controls, and the Flygear dove like a shooting star toward Fufailbane’s tail. Her target, of course, was the wound Inglis had carved with Aether Reflector.

From the Flygear’s deck, Leone swung her greatsword Artifact with all her might. She activated the Gift at the same time, extending and thickening it into a gigantic blade, so huge it exceeded the width of the dragon’s tail.

“Oomph!” Leone grunted as her dark blade, with the full momentum of the booster behind it, bit into Fufailbane’s exposed flesh.

Slaaash!

It was a clean slice.

“All right! I cut it!” she announced.

“Incredible, Leone! Now we’ve got tasty meat to look forward to!” Rafinha cheered.

“Good work!” Pullum said.

“Yes. It’s thanks to Inglis’s setup and Pullum’s support...but that felt good!” The experience of slicing through something so huge was precious. Leone clenched her fists as if trying to preserve the sensation.

“Hey, that big tail’s coming down! Look out!” Lahti shouted from his own Flygear a short distance away.

Indeed, the tail was beginning to tilt toward the *Star Princess*. If it fell on the Flygear, the poor thing would easily be squashed beneath it, to say nothing of what it would do to those aboard.

“I know, I know! I’m not gonna mess this up before I get a chance to try that meat. I’ve been looking forward to it too much!” Rafinha grunted, readying evasive action.

But that wasn’t necessary. A moment later, Inglis jumped into the path of the falling tail, caught it, and hoisted it up onto her shoulders.

The dragon’s tail resembled a gigantic tree, tens of times the height of a young woman, yet the stunning beauty easily carried it on her shoulders. Rafinha and the others were transfixed by the sight. Not only that, but that young woman was beaming with the cutest smile. Overjoyed, she was almost rubbing her cheeks on its scales.

“Y-You can lift that thing?! A normal person would be crushed to a pulp!” Lahti remarked in shock.

Rafinha laughed. “Well, you can’t be surprised at every little thing Chris does.”

“Well, I...guess it’s more convenient if we can just carry it out...”

If they didn’t move the tail now, it would be hard to reclaim it from the swarming phantasms later—better to move it somewhere safer.

“Thanks, Leone, everyone! That was right on target.” Inglis turned to Rafinha and the others, a smile on her face.

Using Aether Reflector to shave away Fufailbane’s scales and reduce his defense, then having Leone, with Pullum’s support, cut the tail off—the plan had worked out beautifully.

If Inglis had tried to cut the dragon’s tail off herself, Aether Strike would have been too weak and merely bounced off, while Aether Breaker would have been too powerful, completely blowing the tail away. She lacked a technique between the strength of those two. Aether was a power that was difficult to handle and difficult to apply. She was developing a range of options, but they still needed work.

Thus, her plan had needed the others. Considering it a hunt for the finest ingredients rather than simply a battle in which the foe was to be destroyed meant leaving the cutting to Leone, so as not to damage said ingredients.

Rrrumble!

Inglis's footing swayed. The ground had begun to shake.

I wonder if Fufailbane's waking up from the pain of having his tail cut off?

The phantasms were ignoring her, instead densely packing around the severed stump of the tail and being absorbed back into him. It was an instinctive attempt to speed up the healing of the wound.

However, such a deep wound would not close quickly. That meant their group had one more step to finish their business.

"Rani! If you would!"

"Sure, leave it to me!" Rafinha handed the controls back to Leone. As she drew Shiny Flow forcefully, the arrow of light which formed in her hand took on a faint aqua glow.

Rafinha had long been familiar with her offensive Gift, but thanks to Ambassador Theodore, she now also had a Gift of healing the wounds of those she touched. The combination of those two Gifts was an arrow of healing light. This was what Rafinha fired toward the stump of Fufailbane's tail.

Fwoooooosh!

The aqua arrow of light struck true, absorbed into the severed stump.

"Is it gonna work?! Please, please, please!" Rafinha watched intently.

A gentle aqua light enveloped the wound. Like how a curtain drops over a stage, regrown skin quickly blanketed the wound. The shortened tail began to grow back as if swelling up from within. This was rapid regeneration in action—a sign that Rafinha's Gift was working—plus it was strengthened by Pullum's support.

"Wow! It's working!"

"All right! The meat's regenerating quickly—" Inglis began. This would probably restore it to its original state in a night. At the same time, as if the pain had disappeared and the dragon had calmed, the ground stopped shaking.

That's probably proof he's calmed down, she thought. Personally, she'd like him to wake up soon so she could have her fight, but for now there wasn't anything wrong with prioritizing the other goal.

“All right! Now we can eat all we’d like!” Rafinha rejoiced.

“That’s right, Rani. Once the tail regrows, we’ll be back to cut it down again.”

“Right, right! So no reason to hold back! We can eat and eat and eat!”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself!” Inglis and Rafinha nodded to each other, their smiles glowing.

“All right, then let’s get back and grill this up!”

“Yeah! Do your best hauling it, Chris!”

“Leave it to me!”

With a happy smile on her face, Inglis dragged the dragon’s tail—which was dozens of times taller than she was—back to the Flygear Port.

Chapter III: Inglis, Age 15—The Ancient Dragon and the (Former) Old King (3)

Clang! Clang! Claaaang!

Hard metallic noises echoed through the forest encampment where the Flygear Port was anchored. Leone and Liselotte swung their weapons repeatedly at the dragon's gigantic tail.

Leone put her dark greatsword to rest and sighed. "It's no good. I can't even make a dent in it." She'd wanted to slice the tail into pieces, but its sturdy scales resisted any attempt to cut it further.

The scales seemed far stronger than steel. When she approached and looked at where she'd slashed, she couldn't see so much as a scratch. "If they're this strong, it would be useful to turn them into weapons or armor—though if the last while has been any indication, that'll be difficult," she speculated.

Maybe they could bring the scales back to the knights' academy and have Principal Miriela or Ambassador Theodore put them to good use. However, Leone was contemplating the possibility of using the materials for the Leclair survivors and the other people in the area who were suffering from food shortages. That seemed like quite a tall order, unfortunately.

"I suppose we have no choice but to simply scoop the meat out from the cut end." Liselotte stopped swinging her halberd and moved toward the section she was speaking of.

Leone joined her. "Yes. I think that's all we can do."

The cut surface, which had once been a clean slice, already had a large hole dug into it. There was no question as to who was responsible. The sizzle of cooking meat and joyful chatter reached Leone's ears.

"Oh wow, it smells so good! And look how juicy it is! I've never seen anything like it!" Rafinha marveled.

"Yes," Inglis agreed. "Dragon meat must be special. I'd heard it was tasty, but I've never had a chance to try it."

The two were in the process of cooking a clump of meat as tall as an adult. They'd used a spear they found among the Flygear Port's cargo to skewer the meat, and Inglis was now roasting it over the fire

with one hand. This was perhaps a bit short of a proper workout, but it wasn't bad. By precisely turning it, she could get the heat to every nook and cranny.

To someone unfamiliar with her, the sight of such a sublime beauty grilling a piece of meat larger than she was one-handed might seem out of place, but everyone present had just seen her hauling back the entire tail. No one could be surprised.

She and Rafinha watched the meat as it slowly cooked, their eyes shining dreamily in bliss.

"Ahhh, this is great!" Rafinha exclaimed. "Thinking back on it, I wanted to tour through Alcard enjoying the local delicacies, but we didn't get the chance until now! Not that this is really Alcardian either, but it's something even more unique!"

"Yeah. Dragon meat is practically legendary; it'll be the perfect souvenir for our mothers. I'm sure they'd love it."

"Oh, that's a good idea! But won't the meat go bad on our way back to Ymir and become inedible?"

"If we make jerky out of it so it keeps, it'll be fine."

"Wow! That's a great idea! I guess we'll have to make plenty, then!"

"Yeah, absolutely."

"But before that, freshly grilled meat for us!" Rafinha giggled. "It feels bad not to be able to share such fresh, juicy meat with our families, but we've earned it by being here! Do you think it's done yet?"

"It needs a little bit more. It's a big chunk, so it needs time to cook through."

"Whaaa? Still? But it smells so good! Whose idea was it to cook the whole hunk in one piece anyway?"

Inglis paused for a beat. "Yours, Rani. You said the impressiveness would make it even more delicious."

"Well, yeah! When will we get another chance? It's every girl's hope, every girl's dream!"

"I can't argue with that, but..."

"I don't think that applies to *every* girl," Leone interjected.

Both she and Liselotte had returned, nonplussed tones in their voices. "It certainly is impressive, but..." Liselotte agreed.

"Hey, you two. How'd it go over there?" Inglis asked.

"We haven't made any progress at all. The scales are too tough to cut," Leone said.

"There seems to be no use we can make of it here. We can simply hollow it out for food for the people, but..." Liselotte said.

"Maybe I'll give it a try later," Inglis said. "There's something I want to do with it."

“Huh? Like what?”

“Umm... Just something for safety’s sake. Or maybe to let me enjoy a fight longer.”

“Well, are you actually focused on safety or fighting?” Leone asked.

“Those are two rather different uses...” Liselotte pointed out.

“Anyway, don’t worry about it. I’ll be good,” Inglis answered.

A sudden squeal interrupted her conversation with Leone and Liselotte.

“Squeeeeeeeeeee! How is this so tasty?! It’s totally different from normal meat!”

Rafinha was erupting in joy. She was in pure bliss as she munched on the meat. In her hand was a small knife piercing a piece of dragon meat, cooked to perfection. It seemed she’d taken the opportunity, while the others were talking, to cut off a chunk.

“C’mon, Rani! No fair sneaking some for yourself!” Inglis protested.

“I just couldn’t wait! And I made sure the part I cut from was cooked through. Anyway, this is soooooo good! You were right, Chris! I’ve never eaten anything like this!”

“Is it really that tasty?” Leone asked.

“I must admit, I am intrigued,” Liselotte said.

“Seriously! It’s incredibly tasty! Even just grilling it, it’s so soft and tender. Despite only seasoning it with some salt, the flavor’s so sublime! Here, have some!”

Rafinha happily gave some of the dragon meat to Leone and Liselotte. The two each raised a piece into their mouths, and their eyes widened in shock.

“It really is! I’ve never had anything like this!” Leone exclaimed.

“It’s entirely different from the meat we normally have!” Liselotte agreed.



“Isn’t it?! And we can have as much of this delicious meat as we want! Let me cut more so we can eat it!” Her hand stretched toward the gigantic clump of meat Inglis was roasting.

“No!” Inglis moved her hand, and the meat escaped Rafinha’s grasp.

“Ah... The meat got away!”

“No fair, Rani! No sneaking some for yourself when I have my hands full! I was holding back too!” Unusually, Inglis pursed her lips in displeasure at Rafinha.

“Aha ha. Sorry, sorry. You don’t need to sulk about it. But you’re adorable when you do.”

“C’mom, I was being serious. If you’re going to be like this, I won’t hold back either!” Inglis again moved her hand, and bit directly into the clump of meat. “Mmmm! Wow, it really is delicious!” It had a strong presence, yet it was tender, and the flavor was sublime. It had a totally different aftertaste than other meat normally had, and it was amazing. To be frank, it was beyond even her own expectations.

This is fantastic. Absolutely the best. The ultimate meat. Just one bite made her smile before she realized it. Inglis chuckled. “This is incredible! It’s so tasty it scares me!”

She chowed down in no time at all. The gigantic piece of meat’s edges receded like an insect-eaten leaf.

Dragon meat is even tastier than it was made out to be! I can’t stop! Inglis’s appetite had been fully whetted.

“I want more too! Give me some!” Rafinha began to bite into the meat from the opposite end. In no time at all, a second opening appeared in the slab of meat.

“Ah, Rahi, fon fuf va mhee vih yuh haeh! Vel geh aw hrifhy! (Ah, Rani, don’t touch the meat with your hands! They’ll get all greasy!)”

“Ahheh nuh fhoi! Ahm vehfuh foo! (I have no choice! I’m desperate too!)”

Leone sighed. “And so it begins again...”

“I don’t understand a word they’re saying, though I suppose they do understand each other,” Liselotte remarked.

“Thyoo muh. Hya, ih hruh hya. (If you must. Here, eat from here.)”

“Faenf! ♪ ...Uch! (Thanks! ♪ ...Yuck!)”

“Wuffan? (What’s wrong?)”

“Hum... Uhvon fin viffuh uhyeh. (Hmm... I don’t think this part’s done yet.)”

“Hovuh affeh. (Hold on a sec.)”

Fwomp!

A spark of magical flame sprang from Inglis's fingertips and roasted the part Rafinha had been eating. It seemed there had been a raw bit left. She'd been worried about that. "That should do it."

"Thanks, Chris! All right, for today, let's eat! Tomorrow we can chop it up and share it among the towns without enough food!"

"Yes," Inglis agreed. "And we need to cut off the tail again when it regrows...wyvvh vvhv. (We'll be busy.)"

"Veffuh ahwuh! Wahh huh, eef weh! (That's what I want! Work hard, eat well!)"

"Vaf hlai, Rahi! (That's right, Rani!)"

Once again, the huge piece of meat was chipped away furiously.

"They... They're probably going to eat the whole thing themselves... That's a terrifying amount," Leone commented.

"Well, that's no issue. Even that chunk is only a small part of the tail. Shall we cut some more and cook it ourselves?" Liselotte offered. "We need to share some with the others too."

"Agreed. Let's."

Before long, Leone and Liselotte had cut out and served the dragon's meat to everyone. No one left dissatisfied.

The best food doesn't only fill the stomach. It brightens the spirits of those who eat it, giving them energy to live for tomorrow. Everyone who enjoyed the dragon's meat would go into the next day with spirits high.



Five days passed. The sunset blanketed the sky in a warm red.

"All right, coming in for landing," said Lahti, at the controls of the Flygear Port as he brought it to rest in an open area. Over the past few days, the area around their camp had been cleared and leveled, so there was no shortage of suitable landing strips. Everyone there was busy at work.

Clank! Thump! Clank, clank, clank!

Although their source could not be seen, there were lively sounds coming from the distance.

"All right, good work, everyone. Let's load up for tomorrow and then call it a day."

"Yes, Prince Lahti! Hear that, everyone? Let's get 'er loaded!" Lewin relayed Lahti's order.

"Yes!"

"Understood!"

"Leave it to us!"

The knights held prisoner in Leclair—now the knights under Lahti's direct command—responded with energetic smiles. When they'd used the Flygear Port and Flygears to distribute dragon meat to the people in the surrounding areas, it had been met with glee and gratitude. Upon finding out that Prince Lahti had brought the food personally, some townspeople had been so moved that they had burst into tears. The knights couldn't help feeling fulfilled by such a sight.

"Leone's probably cutting the meat for us again today."

"She's real cute. Plus, she thanks us for our hard work. All right, I'll be first in line to see her!"

"I think Liselotte's a nice, classy lady."

"True, true, but I gotta say Inglis is the cutest of them all. I mean, they're all cute, but she's head and shoulders above..."

"Sure, but, uh, you saw what she's capable of, though it makes no sense *why* she's punching a hole in the ground."

"Yeah. She's unbelievably cute, but just...*out there*, you know?"

"Yeah, that's what I mean. At least I can understand what Leone and the others are up to."

The knights idly chatted as they went to collect the next day's cargo. Watching them from aboard the Flygear Port, Rafinha was less than impressed. Lahti could pilot the Flygear Port itself, but it also needed to be powered with mana from someone with a Rune. Today, that was her job.

"S-Sorry you had to hear that. They just don't have boundaries," Lahti said.

"They're hesitant around you, but... Please forgive them for their offense," Lewin added.

"No, that's not wrong, but it ain't what she's worried about, Lewin."

"Huh? I'm sorry, Prince, I don't..."

Rafinha sighed. "Right, that's not the issue. Just, this shouldn't be my job. You understand what I mean, right?"

"Hm?" Lewin asked. "Ah. Ah, yes..."

Rafinha didn't mind helping out, but it wasn't the proper role for her. They had all agreed that Lahti would be the face of their relief efforts in the community. That way, the people would gain confidence in him, and his prestige would become a political factor. As Inglis had said, they didn't want to be in the forefront; they wanted Lahti to take the credit and gain that prestige. Rafinha wasn't upset about that.

Even acting as the Flygear Port's power source wasn't a problem. She was happy to see the smiling faces of the residents as she traveled around the towns and villages. Although the physical and emotional scars from a Prismers and Tiffanyer were deep, they could probably move forward now, united around Lahti. That was a relief.

But there was something that kept her from being happy.

“Welcome back, everyone! How were the towns?” Pullum asked.

“Oh, Pullum. Everyone was so happy!” Rafinha said.

“That’s great! You’re about to load tomorrow’s cargo, right? I’ll help out!”

“Yeah! Let’s go!”

Rafinha didn’t want to say more in front of Pullum, but the problem did involve her friend. Pullum should have been in Rafinha’s place.

She was from Alcard herself, so it would be better if she were in the forefront. However, there was the matter of her brother, Harim. A nobleman of Alcard and a competent administrator, he had been charmed by Tiffanyer, become a Highlander, and even acted as her right-hand man as she laid waste to the area.

Because of that, Pullum had said she couldn’t face the people. She had stayed in the camp, picking up odd tasks rather than participating in the relief effort. Rafinha couldn’t say that that was wrong, but...

Anyway, it was true that if Pullum visited the villages, they might grow agitated, indignant at her family, rather than react with gratitude for Prince Lahti. Pullum’s family was of ministerial rank in Alcard. Because their position and reputation came with privileges, the repercussions in a situation like this were also major.

Therefore, in order to not cause unnecessary trouble, Pullum had made the right decision in staying behind. Inglis had explained the reasoning to everyone, and Leone had said she understood. Pullum was doing it all for Lahti’s sake.

“Hey, Pullum. Do you want to go with the Flygear Port tomorrow? Don’t you want to see how things are?” Rafinha asked.

“N-No... I’m curious, but if I go, it’ll cause problems... I’m sorry, Rafinha. I’ll stay here and do what I can.”

“Oh, okay...”

Lewin, who had overheard as he walked nearby, turned to Pullum as if to admonish her. “That will be for the best, Lady Pullum. Now is an important time to win the hearts and minds of the people for Prince Lahti. Instead of reminding them of the wounds they’ve suffered, we must push them to move forward.”

“Yes...” Pullum dutifully nodded.

Perhaps Pullum had simply been browbeaten by Lewin, and continuing to stay in camp wasn’t what she wanted. If that was the case, Rafinha felt that she needed to object, but she was having a hard time knowing when to speak up.

“Lady Pullum, we survived Leclair because you risked your life to stop Harim’s plans to execute us,” Lewin added. “You saved our lives. And for that I’m truly grateful.”

“I-It was...”

“Those of us who were saved understand deeply that you and Harim are not the same. Unfortunately, the public does not have the full context of the situation. Please, when their wounds have healed and they have the luxury of being able to view things calmly, then give them your voice and your feelings. Prince Lahti will create an environment where this will be possible. We will do our best to help, so please be patient.”

“Yes... Thank you.” Pullum smiled.

This time, Rafinha’s silence was not disdain. Lewin seemed to be concerned for Pullum in his own way; she understood that now. She couldn’t exactly accuse him of not caring about her.

“That’s right! We’ll do something—we’ll try our best! So don’t worry.” Lahti clapped a hand on Pullum’s shoulder.

“Yes, Lahti. Thank you.”

But this, Rafinha had something to say about. If the situation didn’t change, Pullum would be forced to endure her pain for too long. Lahti was the best person to do something about that.

Previously, Lahti had declared to Rafinha and the others that when he became king, he’d protect Pullum by making her his queen. Rafinha didn’t think he needed to rush into that immediately, but she did feel he should tell her his plans sooner rather than later. That way, Pullum would have a ray of hope even if things were hard for her, and it would be less awkward for Rafinha to help out. Even though she and the others knew of the plan, they were reluctant to tell Pullum themselves.

“No good. Thirty out of a hundred,” Rafinha muttered.

“Huh?! Wh-What do you mean?!” Lahti shouted.

Inglis had said that Lahti just didn’t want to give Pullum premature hope by promising something that wasn’t concrete yet, and not to worry because time would eventually solve the problem, but...

In Rafinha’s opinion, just letting Pullum know that that was his plan would completely change how she felt about things. She was sure that that was the best choice. And even if he didn’t go that far, surely he could do something to ease Pullum’s worries. He wasn’t acting differently toward her at all. Rafinha wanted him to be at least a little romantic.

“C’mon, you need to do *something*!” Rafinha grabbed Lahti and Pullum’s hands and pulled them together, shocking both of them.

“See, that’s about a seventy,” Rafinha said.

“Wh-What?!” Lahti stammered.

“R-Rafinha?!” Pullum gasped.

“I’ll take care of the loading, you two go for a walk to relax. You must be exhausted from working all day, you need a breather. But

stay like that! No letting go of each other's hands! Now get going! Or I won't help tomorrow, okay?!" With that, Rafinha pushed Pullum and Lahti toward a side street.

"Okay, okay, fine... C'mon, let's go, Pullum."

"Y-Yes, Lahti."

The two slowly, tentatively, stepped forward on the path. They hadn't had much time alone together like this recently, and Rafinha hoped Lahti would use it to tell Pullum what was on his mind. Well, even if he didn't, some time together would be good for both of them.

Lewin didn't seem particularly opposed to the idea either. He watched them leave quietly.

"All right, as for us, let's load tomorrow's cargo!" Rafinha said, energetic now.

Lewin smiled and nodded. "Indeed."





Clank! Smash! Clank, clank, clank!

Following the echoing sound of hacks and slashes, Rafinha arrived at where Leone and Liselotte were dissecting the dragon's tail.

Leone's dark greatsword Artifact, able to adjust its size, was ideal for cutting out the flesh. Except when cutting off more tails—thanks to Rafinha's healing Gift and the dragon's innate regeneration—Leone spent most of her time as the group's butcher, preparing the meat.

Liselotte assisted her. Her halberd Artifact was likewise suited to cutting, and its Gift of flight helped get to pieces that were normally out of reach.

When Rafinha wasn't helping transport the food to settlements as she did today, she was busy processing the meat into jerky or smoking it so that they could preserve more servings. It was an enjoyable task for her, as she could "sample" as much as she liked. Liselotte spent some time helping her, thanks to her wings being useful to dry the meat.

Meanwhile, the knights under Lahti had the task of distributing food to the villages and towns. Additionally, they were responsible for the civil engineering necessary to transform their encampment into a proper settlement. Pullum kept mostly to the latter, while occasionally going to Rafinha and Liselotte to provide additional help with the drying of the meat.

Their decision of where to camp had been haphazard; the new site's location would probably become the center of a new Leclair.

"Look at you two! How's it going?" Rafinha called out to Leone and Liselotte. The snow here was deep, and of course it was cold, but they were still dripping sweat.

"Ah, Rafinha. Welcome back. As you can see, we've still got a ways to go..." Leone said.

"The tails are simply piling up faster than we can butcher them," Liselotte added.

The tail on which they worked was neighbored by another matching it. Even dragon meat was likely to rot if simply left, so they needed to hurry and butcher it so it could be distributed, dried, or smoked.

"Are you going to be able to? Maybe we should get Chris to help out."

"No, we'll be fine. It's good training, and Inglis seems to have her own things to do."

"Not only that, but we're getting faster at it. I suppose we're

getting the hang of things.”

An ancient dragon’s meat was of the finest quality—and extremely delicious—but even butchered, it was simply too springy to cut with an ordinary knife. It was only once cooked that it became tender and the flavor truly came out. Therefore, even with Leone and Liselotte’s Artifacts, this was hard work. Dull, demanding—but everyone was working hard, and it made for good training.

“Anyway, I’m here to get tomorrow’s batch,” Rafinha said.

“Of course. The others have already arrived to do so,” Liselotte said.

“Start with what’s over there. Would you like us to help?” Leone asked.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll get Chris. You two can keep going.” Rafinha went to get Inglis. She was in the woods, farther out from the center of the encampment than where Leone and Liselotte were working.

Clank! Smash! Clank, clank, clank!

The sounds grew louder as Rafinha approached.

Thump, thump, thump, thump! Brrrr! Claaaang!

“Ugh, it’s so loud.” Her ears hurt.

Bam, bam, bam, bam! Thonk! Thonk! Thonk!

Inglis was in a crater that had suddenly opened in the woods. She was ferociously swinging her fists at something at her feet. The noises echoing through the camp were of her pounding on something hard. She’d carved out that crater with only her fists.

“Chris! Stop, stop! Can you give me a hand for a moment?”

Rafinha’s voice stopped Inglis immediately. “Ah, Rani. Welcome back.” The gentle smile on her face was at odds with what she’d just been doing a moment ago.

If she weren’t in the middle of a crater with a fist raised, it would be a fantastically beautiful smile, Rafinha thought.

“You’re not hurt or anything, right? Did something scary happen?” Inglis looked very worried.

If she weren’t in the middle of a crater with a fist raised... Rafinha thought again.

It was because Inglis was always doing things like this that she’d acquired such an odd reputation—one of her unconventionality outshining her beauty. Everyone in the camp had come by at least once to see what the source of all the banging was, only to be taken

aback by her actions. At this point they were used to it, dismissing it with just an “Oh, this again.”

“I’m fine. You’re always so worried about me. Anyway, that hole’s so big! You shouldn’t go totally wild on the environment. Won’t it be tough to fill it back in?”

“Ugh... But I don’t really have any other options. I can’t change the shape of this unless I hit it really hard.” She gestured at something long and thin at her feet.

“Do you really need to do that right now?”

“I think I do. It’ll come in handy sooner or later.”

She picked up what had originally been a dragon’s tail. It was warped now and gave a jangling sound. To be precise, it was the skin and scales on the outer part of the tail, the meat all removed by Leone already. Inglis was trying to process Fufailbane’s scales on-site.

The process appeared to be a primitive one, simply beating the scales with all her might. Nonetheless, it was the most effective of the methods available; her fists with Aether Shell were harder than any tool or Artifact. In other words, it was primitive, but it was rational.

“I guess that’s okay, but maybe take it easy? I’m gonna load the Flygear Port with tomorrow’s meat. Wanna give me a hand?”

“Sure. Afterward we can get dinner.”

“Yeah. I’m gonna eat a ton again today!”

“The meat’s tasty, and we can eat as much as we want without it running out. It’s great!”

“Yeah! It’s so different from when we were eating snow! I hope we can stay like this, eating as much as we want until we get tired of it!”

“Then we’ll be here forever, won’t we? I don’t imagine I’ll ever get tired of it.”

“Aha ha ha. So true! I’m getting hungry just talking about it. Let’s get some work done and then head off to dinner!”

“Yeah, let’s do that, Rani.”

They had no way of knowing that the very next day, things would change completely, shattering Rafinha’s dreams of peacefully eating meat forever and bringing Inglis’s preparations into the limelight.

Chapter IV: Inglis, Age 15—The Ancient Dragon and the (Former) Old King (4)

The group approached Fufailbane's territory the next day via their Flygears to accomplish their daily task of cutting off the ancient dragon's regrown tail, but something was off about it this time.

"Huh? That's funny." Rafinha tilted her head as she piloted the *Star Princess*.

"Hmm, this is odd," Leone agreed from next to her.

"The... What were they—phantasms? I can't see any of them," Pullum said as she looked out from aboard the Flygear.

Lahti's eyes widened.

"What happens to be the matter, Lahti? Your face has gone all pale," Liselotte asked their pilot. She was sitting next to Inglis.

"I... I dunno, but something's giving me the chills! This can't be good. Something *big* feels wrong. Let's get outta here for now!"

"Eh?! What in the world are you—" Liselotte began.

"Chris!" Rafinha interjected. "Do you know what's going on?!"

Inglis chuckled. "Oh, I know. I know this well." An incredibly satisfied smile adorned her face.

"That definitely can't be a good sign," Leone muttered.

"Oh, but it is! I've been looking forward to this for so long. The habit Rani made for me is finally going to fulfill its purpose." Up until now, Inglis had enjoyed the aesthetic of the outfit, and that Rafinha had made it with such care, but now it could really be put to use.

"Ah...! Chris, you don't mean..."

"Yes. The dragon finally awakens..." Inglis chuckled again. She'd already gotten to enjoy the flavor of his meat, but there hadn't been a chance for her to talk with him, much less fight him.

Now the moment she'd been waiting for had arrived.

Tension suddenly filled the faces of the others as they processed what Inglis had said.

"To begin with, I'll go talk with the dragon. Everyone, can you just stay back a bit and watch?" she said.

"W-Will you be okay?" Rafinha asked.

"Yeah. Leave it to me. Oh, but there is one thing I'd like you all to do."

“Huh? Like what?” Lahti asked.

“Say the word, and we’re here to assist you,” Liselotte said.

“Thank you,” Inglis answered. “The thing I made... Take it like this, and do this with it...” She mimed an action for them.

“Oh, this is the thing you were beating on bare-handed?” Lahti asked.

“So... Like this?” Rafinha checked.

“Yeah, you’ve got it!” Inglis gave them her thanks after explaining the process to everyone. “And with that, I’m off!”

She leaped from the Flygear with a smile, doing somersault after somersault before she landed. The spot where she touched down was already deep inside the phantasms’ territory, and normally they’d immediately attack. Inglis was wearing the priestess’s habit, but she hadn’t charged it with mana. As usual, she was applying gravity-enhancing magic to herself to help with her training.

If the ancient dragon were yet unaware of its surroundings, his phantasms should have instinctively attacked her. Because they weren’t around, Inglis reasoned that he was holding back.

She strode toward Fufailbane’s tail, not just perceiving but feeling the sheer intensity of his presence.

“It’s different... I knew it...” Things had progressed over the past few days. She could sense a real change had taken place here. She approached closer, feeling it in her body. This was another thing that had changed in the past few days. At this rate, she could approach him directly even without the priestess’s habit.

Inglis arrived at the dragon’s tail. “Ancient dragon Fufailbane, can you hear my voice? Would you permit me to ask you a few questions?”

As she spoke, words echoed directly in her head. *“Old king, why are you here? How can you bear the accursed might of those gods in your body, yet also the energy of my guardians?”*

“Ah! As I expected of you. You can sense me?” Inglis answered the ancient dragon in the same fashion. She could now communicate telepathically with the being. If that had been possible from the beginning, she might have been able to wake the sleeping dragon peacefully. This was presumably how dragons spoke and communicated amongst themselves.

“How could I forget? That might, the waves of divine energy... I had thought we’d never meet again in your lifetime, but this pleases me. Yet I sorrow for you, old king, for it seems the seal you wove was inadequate. O short-lived son of man, I return even in this momentary time.”

“I see. You sense my aether and recognize me through it.” Inglis nodded deeply. As she’d expected, the dragon could sense and distinguish people by their aether. It was something no one else in this

world but the black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front could do. Thus, she could expect just as much of a fight from the dragon.

She was disappointed, though. Fufailbane recognized Inglis as the old king she'd been in her past life. Not only that, but he'd managed to break free of her seal sooner than expected. Thus, his words implied that this was the first time he'd awoken after being sealed away.

"But there's one thing you're mistaken about," Inglis said in her mind. "That seal was a strong one, created with the power the goddess Alistia granted me directly. This must be the first time you've awoken?"

King Inglis had lived on after sealing Fufailbane, just to be reborn in the far future as Inglis Eucus, and then another fifteen years had passed. All through that time, the ancient dragon had slumbered. If his sleep had been that deep, he may not have even noticed when his tail was cut off.

"What do you mean? That you still draw breath is all the—"

"Come to the surface and see me. Then you will understand. There's no reason for you to stay buried. Though I suppose if you're comfortable down there, I won't interfere."

"Such nonsense. How could I stand by when faced by you? I, slayer even of gods, humiliatingly sealed in the depths by a mere son of man. In my long life, not one other soul has come close. I will strike you down with my own claws and exact retribution for this humiliation!"

Rrrrrrrumble!

The earth swayed as a roar arose. Cracks began to spread forth from where the dragon's tail pierced the surface, which then crumbled, pushed aside by the rise of what lay below.

The dragon's body emerged. Near the tail, Inglis lost her foothold and fell onto his back, carried high into the air. His was a perfectly formed body, rivaling the majesty of a great castle.

"Rooooooaaaaaarrrrrrrrr!"

A deep, intense roar welled up. The air itself seemed to shudder as a tornado-like gust flew forth.

This was the utter majesty of the dragon Fufailbane, an image seared into King Inglis's memory.

Back in that past life, the king had shuddered in his presence, wondering how many sacrifices would have to be made to conquer the mighty beast. As an old man, the king could not take on such a strong opponent alone. For the country and people's sakes, the dragon could not be left to its whims. The lives of many youth with promising futures would be lost, but if they did not go into battle... Ah, if only he

were not old, the king had lamented.

Such were Inglis's memories. However, the shudder that ran through the body of King Inglis then was nothing like the one Inglis Eucus experienced now.

"Ha ha... Ha ha ha... Here it is!"

This one was pure excitement!

"Haaah!" Inglis leaped down from Fufailbane's back and landed directly before him. With a ladylike smile on her face, she bowed politely and said out loud, "Why, hello. It's been so long. I'm glad to see you haven't changed at all."

Inglis's dainty grin perplexed the dragon. The gigantic beast's face wore no expression, but he tilted his head as if questioning her. *"What is this?! The waves of your aether are those of the old king, but..."* The voice within her head sounded confused as well.

"Yes. It's still me. Your senses don't deceive you, so don't worry."

"Yet your form... The garb which marks fresh sacrifices... What magic, what divine intervention, let you commandeer the body of that girl?"

"None at all. I lived out my life—and then, by the might of the goddess, I was reborn. I retain my memories and the powers of a divine knight. A long, long time—longer than I can determine—has passed since our fight. That is why I said the seal was a strong one. I assume this must be the first time you've awakened since then?"

"Hmph... That's hard to believe..."

"As proof, I offer that Mt. Clavoid, which I sealed you under, is gone, and the land here is chilled by the power emanating from you. The world has changed. Can you not sense it? All signs of the gods are gone from the world now..."

"Truly, the energies which flow through the world have changed since then. So the gods have left the world—or found their common ruin in their contention. In either case, you humans have lost your protectors."

"Perhaps." Nowhere in the modern world had she sensed the divine. She had no choice but to concede Fufailbane's point.

"But... What do you mean?"

"About what?"

"Much time has passed—because the world has changed. Are you implying our previous meeting should be water under the bridge? Just as you sent sacrifices in such garb before and told me you didn't wish to fight..."

"Sacrifices? Those were priestesses who worshiped the ancient dragons."

"That's only your interpretation. To me they were nothing more than offerings—nothing more than corpses with shrouds marking them as mine. Some I ate, and some I left until their attachment to life led them to disgrace themselves before me. Their expressions of terror and despair were

the most delicious of all."

"I see... So the ones you left alive to toy with considered themselves the chosen priestesses of the ancient dragons..."

"Not necessarily wrong—though I find it amusing."

"I suppose you wouldn't have been able to tell them the truth."

Inglis considered it might have been a good thing that the existence of so-called "dragon priestesses" had disappeared from history without the truth becoming known.

"The outfit itself is very cute, though..." Inglis muttered.

"Ha ha... I agree myself."

"Oh, does it fit your tastes?"

"A girl's body looks so much fresher than that of the withered old man you were—flesh soft and tender, delicious-looking."

"Well, I probably am a lot tastier now than I was then. So you're planning to eat me?"

"As I said, I will strike you down with my own claws. I will have my revenge. How delicious you look truly whets my appetite—and I've just woken and am very hungry. If your hope was to avoid fighting me, alas! I won't let you escape!"

"Rooooooaaaaaarrrrrrrr!"

Fufailbane roared again. The shuddering air whipped at Inglis's cheeks and blew her long platinum-blond hair around her face, which held a pleased smile. She chuckled. "Why, thank you. Even after so many years, you haven't changed at all... I truly appreciate it."

"Hmm?"

"I'm different now than I was then. I've been reborn, and I'm enjoying my new life in a different way—so I have no intention of avoiding a fight. No matter what, I won't run or hide! If you want to eat me, be my guest. That would make us even!"

She had, after all, already had her fill of Fufailbane's delicious meat. It would be unfair, after eating so much of him, to tell him he couldn't eat her. Maybe dragons and humans really were incompatible.

Humans were a delicious meal for dragons; dragons were a delicious meal for humans. And now she hadn't just heard it, she'd experienced it. There was no going back. With both sides understanding that they were delicious to the other, one had to emerge as the predator with the other as their prey.

A strong, yet delicious, enemy was simply the best. Magicite beasts were strong, and a good fight—but essentially inedible.

"Make us even"? What do you mean?"

Inglis chuckled. "Oh, nothing. Just thinking out loud."

Fufailbane, proud and haughty, would surely fly into a rage if he were to learn that she'd cut off his tail and enjoyed his meat several times as he slept. So that much was best left unsaid.

"Anyway, you're hungry, right? So come eat me. That is, if you can." Inglis nimbly dropped into a fighting stance, beckoning to Fufailbane with a grin on her face.

"How insolent. Very well! Sating my hunger and avenging my humiliation is exactly what I want!"

"Rooooaar!"

Fufailbane roared loudly, raised a front foot, and slammed it down toward Inglis. Although he was huge, his movements were swift and sharp. In the blink of an eye, the claws were upon her.

Boooooom!

It slammed down, making a sound like an explosion. However, despite how massive that foot was and how forceful it was, no dust rose. No dirt was scattered.

Inglis remained in place, her arms folded, meeting Fufailbane's attack head-on. Thanks to that, the ground under her feet wasn't blown away. But his stomp was so powerful that the earth was cracking and sinking.

"What, has becoming young again somehow slowed you down? Don't tell me it's because you have the frail body of a woman."

"Of course not. But I *have* changed in some ways—I just wanted to see if I could withstand that attack."

A king who bore the fate of his country and its people was right to avoid as much damage as possible. Avoiding this blow in place of a greeting from Fufailbane would be the obvious choice.

That wasn't Inglis Eucus's aim, though. Her motivation was growth; she had naturally wanted to take on that attack directly.

The foreleg of the ancient dragon continued to apply horrendous amounts of pressure in his attempt to crush Inglis. It felt so good that she couldn't stop smiling.

"Hmph. Let's see if you're more than your pride!"

"Go right ahead. Try anything!"

"I'll make you regret that!"

"Rooooar!"

Fufailbane roared briefly, and endless numbers of phantasms flowed forth from him. All at once, they swept toward Inglis, who was

enduring his foreleg.

“Gworr!!!” the phantasms shrieked.

The ferocity of their jaws meant a bite on anyone would surely result in injury—except to an ancient dragon, of course, it would be nothing more than a minor distraction.

Inglis couldn’t let something like that tear her outfit. It may have been just a burial shroud to an ancient dragon, a way to designate sacrifices to it, but it was very important to Inglis as something Rafinha had made for her. Besides, she also liked how cute it looked on her.

“Haaaah!” Inglis shouted her battle cry as she thought, *Aether Shell!* The waves of aether around Inglis turned back the phantasms’ fangs, leaving both her and her outfit untouched.

“Ugh! *That accursed divine might...*”

“There’s more than that!” Inglis had blocked the dragon’s blow without Aether Shell up until now, but now that it was active, she could do more than endure.

“Haaaah!” Inglis’s contest of strength with the dragon, which had been at a stalemate, suddenly tilted in her favor. She pushed straight into the pressure and repelled it. The massive foot no longer blocked her vision, and as the full form of the ancient dragon came into sight, so did something else.

A shimmering, icy shine was already spiraling around his mouth.

“Ah!” *You really can’t get anything by him!* This was a dragon’s breath, condensed from Fufailbane’s power to freeze. If a human body were exposed to it, it would be frozen and then shattered by a follow-up strike. When she’d fought the ancient dragon in her past life, she’d seen many succumb to such icy assaults. It was probably one of Fufailbane’s most powerful attacks.

Whoooooooooosh!

A blast of extreme cold accompanied yet another roar.

“I’ll meet that straight-on!”

Aether Strike! Inglis smashed a blast of aether directly into the shimmering breath.

Blammmmmmm!

The dragon’s breath and Inglis’s Aether Strike collided, straining against each other for a moment—but the Aether Strike won out, pushing toward the dragon.

“Gah?!” Fufailbane grunted.

“Aha!” The slight pause required after using Aether Strike had

already passed. Now it was time to follow up with Aether Shell for an Aether Breaker!

Inglis formed her Aether Shell around herself and leaped to catch Aether Strike's slow advance.

"*Gwuhhhh?!*" With startling speed, the ancient dragon swung his gigantic tail forward.

Claaang!

It struck the Aether Strike, sending it off on a different course, meaning Inglis wouldn't be able to detonate Aether Breaker as intended.

"Not bad! But you'll have to do more than that!" Inglis immediately changed her angle midair and placed herself in the Aether Strike's new trajectory. "Please accept this humble gift!"

Smaaash!

Her kick once again redirected the Aether Strike toward the dragon.

"*How impudent!*" Fufailbane showed no sign of the slowness his huge body might imply. He reacted swiftly to the Aether Strike sent his way once more.

Claaang!

Once again, his tail sent it flying off in a different direction.

"I'm not done!" This time, she caught the light above Fufailbane's head and sent it down with her fist.

"*How obstinate!*" The dragon's treelike tail flexed and cracked like a whip. It was strong enough to deflect even divine light, yet it only whooshed through the air this time. "*Gah?!*"

The Aether Strike had changed its course midair, out of the way of the tail swipe. Inglis had redirected it preemptively, and Fufailbane had taken no notice of her move.

With that, he was convinced. There was no mistaking it—this reborn girl was stronger than the old king.

A long time had passed since then, but the battle with the old king was still a fresh memory for Fufailbane, who had slept all that time. Back then, the king hadn't been able to move faster than the dragon could follow—Inglis had been a manageable opponent for Fufailbane, which was why the decision to seal the ancient dragon away had been a necessary one to spare other soldiers.

But the girl before him now was different. Completely different.

Unlike the old king, Inglis did not confront the dragon with grim resolve and a sense of duty weighing down on her, but instead with a small grin on her face as she approached him joyfully. Fearlessly. Insolently. With a speed that exceeded even his reactions. It was the first time he'd ever experienced such a thing. He felt an indescribable sense of bewilderment.

A moment later, the Aether Strike slammed into his back.

“Gwah?!”

“All right!” Inglis wasn’t going to let that opportunity pass her by. *A quick follow-up—!* She dove toward the point of impact, but before she could reach it, Fufailbane twisted his body and spread his wings, soaring high into the sky. He truly was agile for his size. *But that’s what makes this interesting!*

Inglis kept going, not dropping any momentum. Fufailbane may have fled to the safety of the air, but the Aether Strike hadn’t dissipated yet, and she wanted to catch it before it hit the ground and disappeared. She planned to kick it up for another attack, so long as she reached it in time.

However, Fufailbane wouldn’t make that so easy.

Whooooooooosh!

A shimmering torrent of air shot forth to envelop the point of impact.

“Ah—!” Inglis gasped, watching the Aether Strike finally lose its power, dissolving into mist from that immense wind pressure.

“You won’t be able to do that again!”

“Not bad!”

The dragon’s breath, having neutralized the Aether Strike, next headed for Inglis. If she took a direct hit from that, not even Aether Shell would save her. Dragons drew power from their very existence and were able to manipulate supernatural phenomena with it. They were beings with a unique, biological source of power.

In the days of King Inglis, those who studied dragons had referred to that power’s structure and principles as “dragon lore,” a force separate from mere magic with its use of mana. It was also separate from aether, the elemental root of all physical matter. In other words, it was fundamentally independent of the laws of nature. It was something entirely different.

There were various theories on how to interpret this. Some proposed that the dragons came from another world; others believed the dragons were created by entities other than the gods humans knew; and some argued that dragons had served a god before slaying

it and taking its power for their own.

Inglis didn't know which was correct. However, she was sure that the power of dragons was mighty enough for the third theory to be plausible. The innate qualities of dragon lore were a match for aether—especially that of Fufailbane, one of the strongest dragons.

Inglis dodged around, continuing to avoid the dragon's breath. The densely compressed sparkling chill almost instantly turned to ice when it struck the ground, creating obstacles. "This is incredible! Precisely what I hoped for from an ancient dragon!"

Blocks of ice, shining like gems, rose all around her. Inglis was astonished at the sight. Such intensity, sustained for so long, represented a tremendous amount of power—yet it showed no sign of weakening. If she had burned through that much power for that period of time, she'd have already completely exhausted herself. Endurance wasn't the whole story of a fight—but her own was easily outmatched here. She couldn't deny it was a weak point of hers. And it was something that only more practice would fix; she'd have to make sure to make time for that if she wanted to be able to keep up. There was no other way to make up the difference.

"What's wrong? You're merely scurrying around!"

"Or am I?!"

Her foe was in the air, and she was on the ground. And the high ground held the advantage. To counterattack, she could either leap up into melee range or fire an Aether Strike—both of which were essentially linear. With such a gap between them, the dragon could simply use his agility to either counter or dodge. And she didn't have many shots of Aether Strike left in her.

Even if she tried to change the trajectory of an Aether Strike by striking it after firing it, the lack of footholds in the air would make that difficult to pull off. Considering Fufailbane had far more endurance than her, she wanted to be sure that any blow struck true. So for now, she could only evade and wait for her chance. And that would come soon.

Fufailbane's breath attack was endless. *"You can't run away forever!"* he threatened, and swung his foreleg downward. Since he was not swooping toward the ground, it should have been only a threatening brandish, unable to reach Inglis.

But the gigantic limb suddenly doubled in her vision. A dragon's foreleg with pale, translucent tinge like a phantasm's, following the trajectory Fufailbane himself had set. Not a phantasm itself, but a *phantasmal* dragon's leg.

"Ah—!"

Flying all the way down to the surface, it loomed down on Inglis. It felt far too powerful, even for Fufailbane.

Bammmmm!

The leg punched a hole in the ground with a rumbling sound, shattering the ice crystals where it landed and sending shards flying. Inglis was hit with the impression that she was standing in the middle of a fantastical starfield.

This was an attack based on the use of phantasms. By manipulating the flow of his energy and focusing it on a single point in his body, Fufailbane could manifest entire phantasmal limbs, capable of destructive power equal or greater to that of the dragon himself. Just as the phantasms were able to function at some distance from the dragon, so could this.

Inglis's Aether Shell protected her from the fangs of the phantasms. Therefore, the dragon had focused his biological energy to increase his attacks' raw power. Inglis didn't need to take a hit to know that it was mightier than the dragon's own blows. In melee combat, where the dragon himself could also reach, his offensive potential would be more than doubled.

Inglis would have loved to take that on head-to-head—but the current situation didn't allow for it. The combination of the dragon's breath from a distance and this phantasmal foreleg in pursuit had made it more difficult to continue evading.

She leaped out of the path of the falling phantasmal forelimb, then thrust a blade of ice into the ground to abruptly stop her movement and avoid the freezing breath aimed ahead. Fufailbane's dragon breath immediately changed direction to chase after her, but she rushed ahead before it could catch up.

Inglis had no time to rest, though. Fufailbane's right forelimb loomed over her. Sensing its presence, she nimbly twisted left and continued on. The left forelimb struck down as if to block her path, crushing not her but a gigantic ice crystal.

The blow fell near me, but not on me. He can chase me, but he can't catch me. That means I can keep evading, but...

"Take this!" Fufailbane swung his massive tail as if in response. If his forearms weren't enough, he'd use his tail too. The phantasmal tail sprung from the ground, swinging in from Inglis's right, closing in on her as it swept away the ice crystals on that side.

Krrrshhhhh!

The tail struck the crystals, which then struck each other.

The tail that possessed the finest meat she'd ever enjoyed also embodied the finest destructive power. That this attack from the

phantasmal tail was even stronger went without saying.

She leaped up to avoid it, but the loud noise and the hail of ice shards scattering made it hard to grasp the situation. And Fufailbane showed no inclination of not taking advantage of this.

“Now I’ve got you!”

“Ah?!”

Slam!

Something suddenly struck Inglis in the side—a blow from the right phantasmal forelimb. It sent her flying, and she hit the ground hard, bouncing a couple times before she regained her footing. “Ah, you’re ruining my clothes!”

“I’m going to crush you into a pulp!” The phantasmal left forelimb swung before her.

“No thanks!” Inglis shouted with passion. Rafinha had gone through all the work of sewing this outfit for her. Inglis wasn’t going to let anyone ruin it!

Thuuud!

Her right fist caught the limb. The shock of the impact blew away the ice shards raining down. Her struggle with the focused dragon lore power was nothing like when she’d fought the phantasms, and the two fighters’ limbs strained at each other in a stalemate.

Inglis gasped, then chuckled. “You put up such a wonderful fight!”

She slowly began to win out, pushing Fufailbane back—but she did have to admit that the phantasmal leg’s strength was very close to that of her own punches with Aether Shell active. She couldn’t help but smile at the numbness in her arm from when the two had collided. Here was a fight she could enjoy for a long time, working up an appetite for that delicious tail meat to enjoy afterward.

Ancient dragons were so wonderful—not a single thing was wasted.

“Tch! But as long as I have wings...!” Fufailbane must have meant that his positional advantage was unassailable.

“Not necessarily!” Inglis ran forward at full speed, then leaped up—but not on a direct course for the dragon. Her destination was one of the ice crystals Fufailbane’s tail had swept into the air. The ferocious might of his attack had sent them flying so high that they were still raining down.

“Haaaah!”

Using it as a foothold, she leaped again. And again and again—jumping from ice crystal to ice crystal, she ascended into the sky. If

she'd jumped straight up to attack, she still wouldn't have closed enough distance between herself and Fufailbane, meaning he would have had time to react and counter. However, by leaping from ice crystal to ice crystal, keeping herself hidden and taking a complex trajectory, Fufailbane couldn't keep up with her. The tail sweep had been how he'd caught her, but it was also a golden opportunity from her perspective.

"What?! You miserable hopping—"

"Thanks for putting me on even footing! And one other thing: don't assume that being up in the air is always an advantage! Because—!"

Slammmmmmm!

The loudest sound yet rumbled as a kick by Inglis, aimed straight as an arrow, plunged into Fufailbane's abdomen.

"Guh?! Gwahhhhhh?" Fufailbane's gigantic form twisted in the air.

"Because your belly doesn't have those hard, hard scales—see?"

Scales carpeted Fufailbane's head, his neck, his back and tail—but not his abdomen. Flying in the sky, looking down on her, meant that from her angle, his soft underbelly was exposed. It wasn't as much of an advantage as he assumed.

"Gah! It'll take more than that!" Fufailbane righted himself in an instant. It had been an effective blow, but he was certainly quite sturdy. And even with the blood rushing to his head, he was still a calculating fighter.

He quickly descended to the ground, so as to protect his abdomen. Even then Inglis still had to crane her neck to look at him.

"So, shall we melee now?"

"I've come to a realization. Reduce this to a struggle of whole strength, and I win!"

Fufailbane's assessment made sense. The power of his phantasmal tail or forelimbs conjured by dragon lore alone was a match for her own direct attacks with Aether Shell. Furthermore, the strength of his physical body was fearsome, adding additional strength behind the phantasmal attacks. That added advantage would let him pressure her—*crush* her. Once that kind of pressure was applied, a frail human body could easily be obliterated.

Based on their battles up to now, Fufailbane was correct in such an assessment. No doubt.

But he was wrong here!

"Rrrrrrrrrraah!"

"Haaaaaaaah!"

Slammmmm!

Fufailbane's gigantic, brutal spiked foot and Inglis's pale, delicate hand collided head-on with a thunderous noise.

The one pushed back, falling flat on his back, was the ancient dragon Fufailbane.

"Wh-What?! Impossible!" Fufailbane shrieked uncontrollably. *It is unfathomable. Absolutely unfathomable. How, how?* he must have been asking.

But his confusion did not stem from the result. He understood clearly why he had been pushed back in a head-on clash of fists: another force was driving this young girl, the reincarnation of the old king. It was a force Fufailbane knew better than anyone else.

A pale, translucent dragon's foot had appeared overlapping Inglis's hand, pushing him back—the same phantasmal limb he'd used. Its addition had outmatched him, flipping him onto his back. He knew such a strong supplement in offense would break the stalemate in her favor—but *how* could that have happened?

"How?! How could you?!" he roared without losing focus on the fight. Flipped over, his abdomen was exposed. Expecting he'd be struck during the opening, he braced himself as quickly as possible while focusing his dragon lore on his belly. Thanks to his swiftness, he succeeded in regaining his footing before the attack struck.

"My dragon lore! How?!" Fufailbane turned his gaze to Inglis—but she was gone. *"Gwuh?! Where are you?!"*

"No matter how hard your scales are, you'll still feel the impact inside!"

"Above me?!"

Fufailbane looked to the sky. There Inglis was, twisting into a kick. Her legs, so shapely and delicious-looking, were clad in a phantasm of his own tail manifested through dragon lore.

And that was the last thing Fufailbane saw, for now.

"Haaaaaaaah!"

Booooooooooooooooooom!

Inglis's kick, powered not just by Aether Shell but also by dragon lore, exploded into Fufailbane's head. No matter how strong his scales were, the impact shook his brain inside. The divine dragon's body, struck by Inglis's full force, wavered, then collapsed with an earthshaking rumble.

Inglis, still poised, watched for a moment. *Seems he's not getting up anytime soon. I think I've knocked him into a stupor.*

She took a breath and wiped the sweat from her forehead, allowing herself a moment to relax. “Phew... Ah, that was fun.”

He truly was the ancient dragon Fufailbane, slayer even of gods. His might was exceptional, far outpacing that of any other foe Inglis Eucus had faced.

The only two who might rival him were the black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front, and Yua, who seemed to have advanced in mysterious, unexplained ways by absorbing the power of the Prismers.

“I’m elated. Even though you’re gigantic, I was able to overpower you.” Inglis giggled, bunching up her fists and smiling cutely. This result was something old King Inglis would never have thought possible. Even if it was something only she could do, it was a great feat.



She had now clearly surpassed the old King Inglis. Knocking out the ancient dragon Fufailbane on her own was proof. Even if only she knew why this was so important to her, it was something to be happy about.

Only fifteen years old, and she'd already come this far. She was not yet aged and infirm. She could aim higher and higher. She couldn't be satisfied with just this—she wanted to push herself ever harder toward mastery.

This time she'd relied on the dragon lore she just acquired—next time, she'd try to win with only her own aether. Without that dragon lore, the results would have been much more unpredictable. In that respect, Inglis had gotten lucky.

As for why Inglis had dragon lore, shocking even him—there was only one reason she could think of.

She'd *consumed* him—his tail meat.

Even in the time of King Inglis, there had been legends of dragonslayers, warriors who killed a dragon and gained its supernatural power. She'd never seen an actual example, thus writing it off as an unreliable rumor. She assumed any warrior able to kill a dragon probably had supernatural power themselves, and thus it'd be difficult to tell the difference.

However, this seemed to confirm the rumors. She quite obviously was imbued with Fufailbane's dragon lore. She hadn't killed the dragon, of course, but it seemed that cutting off his flesh and eating it was equivalent. It was a little bit different from the legend, but since that had been vague enough to begin with, she couldn't see any choice but to accept it.

And there was another difference from the legend—apparently, not everyone who ate Fufailbane's meat was imbued with the dragon lore. Rafinha, Leone, and the others didn't seem to have that power. It might have been a question of how much meat, but Rafinha had kept up with Inglis's appetite, yet showed no signs, so there went that theory.

The legend said that anyone who slew a dragon gained its power, but that wasn't true. There was a question of *compatibility* with an ancient dragon's dragon lore, and only those who were compatible could receive a dragon's strength.

What exactly "compatible" meant was unclear, but Inglis was glad to have it. Dragon lore would let her aim higher and higher. She'd have to train hard to master it and make it her own.

When controlling the dragon lore at this point, the ancient dragon's own limbs and tail appeared for her. She could assume that it was obviously just borrowed power. If she made it her own, the

dragon lore which converged with her body would likely match her own hands and legs.

From that perspective, she still had a long way to go. Having gained the power of dragon lore before she'd even mastered aether made her want to scream with a mix of joy and frustration at the added distraction.

That new power required more training. And fortunately, she had the perfect partner right here. She hoped she could fight him over and over. Coming all the way up north to Alcard had paid off.

"Chris! Are you okay? Can we come closer?!" Rafinha's voice rang out from above. She was aboard the *Star Princess*. The rest of the group was with her and had brought a certain thing with them. It was long, heavy, and resembled a chain.

It couldn't fit aboard the aircraft, so they had tied the ends to the hulls of both Flygears to carry it.

"Yeah. I'm fine, Rani! Thanks, can you drop the chain for me?"

"Okay! Here goes!"

Jangle, jangle, jangle!

Inglis grabbed it deftly as it fell from the sky with a clamor. It felt secure in her hand. The chain was rough, spiky, and distorted, but its strength was extraordinary. After all, it had been braided from Fufailbane's own scales. She'd worked hard to make it with what was available locally on the outskirts of their camp for just such an occasion.

Even Fufailbane wouldn't be able to break a chain made from the hard scales of which he was so proud. He was still needed to provide food and a sparring partner, and he wasn't the type to accept being told to do so. They were going to have to force him to comply.

"Sorry, but... Stay still for me for a second, okay?" Inglis looped the dragonscale chain around Fufailbane's body. Once she had finished, she bowed politely to the still unconscious dragon. "I had a great time today. Thank you very much."

"You sound awfully polite for someone who gave it a beating," Rafinha commented.

"Y-Yes... I feel a bit sorry for it," Leone agreed.

"Indeed," Liselotte said.

Rafinha and the others were all stunned.

"Really? He'll be fine. I'll just apologize when I come to fight him again tomorrow," Inglis replied.

"Wait, you want to keep going?" Lahti asked. "Try not to get the base caught up in this."

"Please be careful, Inglis!" Pullum pleaded.

“Sure. Anyway, let’s head back. That fight left me starving.”

All that remained at the site of the battle was Fufailbane, his tail lopped off and cooked, as he rolled back and forth, wrapped in a chain of his own scales.

That night, his reproachful roars echoed through the camp.

Chapter V: Inglis, Age 15—The Ancient Dragon and the (Former) Old King (5)

Inglis approached the dragon the next day.

“Hello there. How might you be doing today?”

“Curse you!”

Roooooooooooooooooooooo!

When Inglis loosened the dragonscale chain, Fufailbane let out a cry of utmost rage. A sudden gust ruffled her platinum-blond hair, and she felt the sheer malevolence of the beast pierce through her.

It chilled. It stung. But it felt great; it meant another good fight awaited her today. “I’m glad to see you’re in fine spirits. And just look, your tail’s already regrown! Such impressive healing power.”

“Do you think that flatters me?! I know now how you bear my dragon lore! While I slumbered, you must have cut off my tail and eaten it!”

“Ah, I knew you’d realize. Yes, that’s correct. I swear I did not do so with the intention of gaining your dragon lore. That was entirely unexpected.”

“What? Then why would you do such a thing?!”

“Well, circumstances are dire... For reasons out of their control, the inhabitants of this region have found themselves short of food. We arrived just in time to get it to them, so we’ve been borrowing your tail as you slept.”

“That’s even worse! To debase an ancient dragon like myself as mere livestock... To take my meat as charity for lowly humans...!”

“No, no, of course we weren’t treating you as livestock! Your meat was completely different. After all, it’s extremely... I don’t even have the words for how delicious it is!”

“What is that supposed to mean?!”

Slammmmm!

Enraged, Fufailbane slammed his tail on the ground, and the quake was so intense that it tossed Inglis into the air for a moment.

“Is being delicious not high praise?”

“Silence! To mock an ancient dragon so... I have never known such humiliation in all my long life!” Fufailbane craned his neck, ready to spray his freezing dragon breath.

Clack! Clack!

However, he had been carefully muzzled with the dragonscale chain, and that part of it had not yet been relaxed. No matter how much force he put into it, all that would come forth was that strained noise.

“Gnnh! How vexing! Not even I can tear through my scales!”

“Now, now, calm down. A long life gives you plenty of time to encounter the unexpected. My own life is far shorter than yours, but still long for a human. I lived a full life to old age—and never expected that I’d be reborn, much less as a girl, but I’m enjoying it. May I suggest that you simply go with the flow and find your own enjoyment where you can?”

“To have my scales torn away and be devoured like livestock... Where is the enjoyment in that?! What utter nonsense! I cannot let this stand! I will not let this stand! This time I will smash you and slaughter all you puny humans! I will ensure you lesser beings will never be able to show me such disrespect again!”

“I see... Then, shall we fight? I’m sure the violence will grant you more of a distraction than sitting still does.”

“Bring it on! Yesterday you took me by surprise, but that won’t happen again! I already know your tricks!”

Inglis chuckled. “Today I’d like to focus on melee combat, so keep your mouth closed, okay? I won’t be using any projectiles either. And I’ve changed into clothes that I don’t mind ruining, so let’s fight up close as hard as we can.”

“That matters not! Die!”

“Thank you for taking this so seriously. Your doing so will help me get stronger! Haaaah!”

Blammmmmmm!

Inglis’s fist and the foreleg of the ancient dragon clashed with a deafening roar.

Slaaam! Rrrrrumble!

The aftershock of the force became a blast of wind that shook the *Star Princess* and the other Flygears in the skies above.

“It’s even more intense than yesterday!” Liselotte exclaimed.

“Chris said she was going to wear something she didn’t mind getting dirty so she could really get in close,” Rafinha pointed out.

“Well, it seems she was telling the truth!” Leone said. “I can’t even follow the fight with my eyes, but the sound and the shock waves are incredible!”

“That dragon she’s fighting seems angry!” Lahti remarked.

“You can tell?” Rafinha asked.

“Hm? Well, it just seems that way. Like he’s real, real mad!”

“Well, I guess he would be, being left like that overnight,” Rafinha said.

It was a bit distressing thinking of the dragon’s position in all of this, but that didn’t fill the empty bellies of the starving. Furthermore, Inglis had said that he wasn’t the type who would cooperate if asked nicely; in fact, he would in turn devour these hungry people if left free, so it was necessary to keep him bound. Rafinha couldn’t object to that. She left those matters in Inglis’s hands.

“But such an intense fight against such a massive monster... I can see how she managed to fight off even the evil hial menace Tiffanyer!” Lewin said, wide-eyed.

He had asked to come watch the battle. He had known Inglis was no ordinary person, both when he saw her carrying the dragon’s huge tail with a smile on her face, and when he saw her reshaping the dragon’s scales with her bare hands, but he was still awestruck by her power.

The strength that let her overcome a dragon head-on with a single punch, the speed she had that made her too fast to see...and yet when she did flicker into his vision from time to time, Lewin was also captivated by the beauty and grace of her motions. “I never realized people could be so strong, so beautiful, so capable all at once.”

“Well, Chris is special,” Rafinha replied. “She has the body of an angel, but the soul of a warlord.”

Lewin nodded. “Ha ha ha. Watching her, I can’t help but agree.”

“See? Told ya. If she can’t do anything about a dragon, there isn’t anyone who can,” Lahti said.

“You were right, Prince Lahti. But there’s one thing I don’t understand—why is someone like that only a cadet squire? If she can take on a hial menace, she should be a holy knight, if not more. Perhaps it’s the fortune of our country that she’s trapped in obscurity in Karelia. We could promise her an important position here in Alcard...”

“No, that won’t work. She’s a squire because she wants to be a squire,” Lahti explained.

“Huh?”

“Carlias, the king of Karelia, invited her to become the captain of

the Royal Guard, but she turned him down. Said it would be too much trouble.”

“Wh-What?! I don’t understand! Why?!”

“She said she’d rather stay in the trenches polishing her skills, which she could do by being my squire forever,” Rafinha said.

“Though I’d rather she eventually marry my brother and become a duchess...”

In Rafinha’s mind, that was how they would truly become sisters. Inglis would be with Rafael, and Rafinha would be with a wonderful person she hadn’t met yet. Both women would have children at around the same time and raise them together, forming a loving family like their mothers had. That was Rafinha’s ideal future. At the same time, she intended to fulfill her duties as a knight to society and her home of Ymir, so how to balance the two weighed on her mind.

“I...see...” Lewin responded.

“Anyway, trying to reel her in with a title isn’t gonna work. Basically, we have to let her do what she wants. You can’t tell Inglis what to do,” Lahti said.

“She’s like a force of nature, then...”

“Pretty much, but she’s not bad... I mean, she’s really good looking, and she’s got a chaperone—she listens to Rafinha, so don’t worry.”

“I suppose. So it’s not like you’re forcing her to take on the hard fights alone?” Lewin asked.

“Absolutely not,” the others answered in unison. “She wants that.”

“Ha ha ha... I see...”

“And it’s important too. We still need food,” Lahti added.

“Yeah,” Rafinha agreed. “So we can’t stop her... Chris always comes up with a good reason to do what she wants.”

Blammmmmmmmm!

The loudest sound yet interrupted them.

“Grrryaohhhhh!”

The gigantic dragon let out an explosive shriek and collapsed. In the wake of that scene came forth Inglis, a pleased smile on her face as she waved up at the crowd in Flygears.

“All right! Today was fun. Rani! Everyone! You can go ahead now, let’s cut that tail while we can! ♪”

“Looks like she’s done. All right, it’s hunting time! Let’s go!” Rafinha called.

The days of Inglis knocking Fufailbane out in a fight, before they

took his tail while he was out cold and then distributed the meat to the hungry nearby towns and villages, continued for a while.



Inglis got to enjoy her ideal training—the repeated serious fights with Fufailbane—and then enjoy his delicious meat afterward. The happy days went on, Inglis enjoying them to the fullest.

And then, one day, suddenly they came to an end.

“Hello! Let’s do this again today.” Inglis bowed her head politely. Her lovely, happy smile, as usual, was today paired with a quite contrasting large object in her hand. It was a bit warped, but still recognizably a sword, and of an extraordinary size, larger than herself. Its dull, light-blue sheen was unmistakably that of Fufailbane’s scales.

After making a large quantity of spare chains for restraining the dragon and becoming more familiar with how to process the scales, she’d tried her hand at weapon crafting. As before, the manufacturing process had been based on striking the scales with her bare hands, so she hadn’t been able to do anything as precise as sharpening the blade. However, she’d used the scales of an ancient dragon to make the blade; it was guaranteed to be quite strong, probably stronger than the ice swords she created with magic, and naturally superior to the average Artifact. It might even stand up to all-out fighting with aether.

Truly, the ancient dragon had brought her great blessings: new powers, a training partner to hone them with, delicious food when she was hungry, and even an ultimate weapon. She was truly in the dragon’s debt.

“Look at this! I made a sword with the scales I got from you. I think it’s really strong. Will you help me try it out today?”

There would be no better test of it than him. Could a sword made from Fufailbane’s scales cut through the living scales of the dragon himself? It would be a great test of her mastery of the blade as well. She couldn’t help but be excited at the idea of a different fight from those of the last few days.

“Most weapons just break under the load of aether at full power, so I’ve had trouble finding any I can use to the fullest. Perhaps this one will be different—and it’s all thanks to you. Thank you for everything.” Another polite bow, and then it was time to fight. How powerful might a greatsword made of dragon scales be?

Inglis’s eyes gleamed, but Fufailbane was indifferent. *“Hmph. If you wish to play with your toy, do it somewhere else. It’s none of my business.”* He lay down and curled up.

“Huh?! Wh-What’s wrong?” Inglis gawked. “Up until now you’ve been kind enough to attack me with such vigor and viciousness!” Thanks to that, she’d had the most wonderful training.

“I don’t care. I’m done dealing with you.”

“Huh?! Wait, wait! Did you eat too much? Or wait, are you so hungry you can’t work up the energy? I can’t feed you any humans, but I’ve got plenty of tasty meat! Would you like some? Should I bring it to you?”

“Silence! That meat is my own! I am no cannibal!”

“B-But I need to get you nice and energetic so you can fight me today... What’s wrong?”

“I do not deign to waste my time. And regretfully, as I currently am, I cannot win. Having realized such, fighting would be a waste.”

“Wh—?! Is such a thing acceptable for the pinnacle of all dragons?! The pride of a champion should not be so cheap!”

Fufailbane did not respond.

“A real fight is the best practice there is. You might even be able to beat me with how you grow from it! No one can deny that possibility! So c’mon, don’t give up! Get up and give it another try! I know you can do it!”



“Hmph. You’re wasting your time. I may well grow, but you will grow further. The more we battle, the more the gap widens. You can’t tell me you don’t realize that.”

This time Inglis was the one who fell silent.

“To reverse this... One way would be for me to become dramatically stronger, but such a miracle is beyond me unless I evolve into a wyrm right now.”

“Ooh! What’s that?! An even stronger dragon?! How do you turn into one?! Please, waste no time!”

“Speak not of the impossible! A dragon grows more powerful with each passing year, and the time for me to become a wyrm is far, far in the future. Many times longer than I have lived so far. And you, of course, will not be alive then.”

“I guess I’ll have to be reborn a few more times... Maybe I can see the goddess and ask her for that? Though I don’t know where she is...”
Inglis had not sensed the presence of the goddess Alistia anywhere in this world.

“There is one other way to close that gap.”

“Mm?”

“It is to wait for your decline. To me, a human’s life is nothing but a fleeting moment, like seafoam. Thus, I will no longer enable your growth. Instead, I will wait for you to age, to fade, and then I will eat you alive. We dragons and you humans have different scales of time, and I will use that to my advantage.”

Inglis gasped, letting out a quiet “N-No!”

Fufailbane’s strategy was frankly an effective one, especially when applied to Inglis. The mind of an ancient dragon was, as she expected, different from that of a normal monster. Both cunning and practical.

She had no immediate response to him—or did she?

“Ugh... Ahh! Owwww!” Inglis suddenly clutched her right elbow and hunched over.

“Hmm?”

“My... My arm... It’s been under a lot of strain from all this fighting... It might be broken! Fighting will be so hard now! It might even be too dangerous!”

Fufailbane stared at her.

“Ahh, I’m scared...” Inglis continued. “I’d be in real trouble if you attacked me! You might even eat me up!”

“Don’t be so brazen. That’s an obvious act.”

“Ahhhhhhh! It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts!”

“Silence, I said! Cease your chatter!”

“Ugh... You heartbreaker! Who *should* I fight, then?” Inglis glared at Fufailbane very, very bitterly.

"I don't care! Are you really the same person as that old king?! Every time you open your mouth, it's about fighting or eating—you're like some kind of beast! That wrinkled old man was a more admirable human than you!"

"I'm just living this second life I was given freely and honestly, in line with my desires! Anyway, if I really broke my arm, would you fight me then? I'll do it myself if I have to!"

"Such foolhardiness will change nothing! Enough is enough! In any case, I will fight you no more! If you wish to take the coward's path of torturing one who does not resist to death, go right ahead. If you want the meat of my tail, I will give it to you. Cut it off and take it." Fufailbane laid the massive length of his tail before Inglis, offering no resistance.

Presented with an attitude like that, Inglis was hesitant to cut off his tail.

As she weighed whether her hunger and her desire to try her new sword were enough to drive her to do it anyway, Rafinha's voice rang out from above. "Chris! What's wrong? Aren't you going to fight today?" Enough time had passed without the fight starting, so she'd started to descend to see what was going on.

"Rani! Yeah, it's a long story..."

"If it seems okay, can I come closer and take a look?"

"Ah? Yeah, it should be fine."

With Inglis's approval, Rafinha slowly landed beside Inglis.

As they did, Inglis kept a close eye on Fufailbane. "The dark-haired one is called Rafinha. If you do anything to hurt her, I don't care if you surrender to me—I'll slaughter you. Understood?"

"Hmph. Noted," Fufailbane responded motionlessly. His demeanor was cold. More than anything, he was a calculating dragon, and his plans involved avoiding a fight with Inglis until the tables had turned. He could likely be relied upon to heed the warning. He needed to wait before seeking his vengeance.

"Wow... It's amazing looking at him close up like this," Rafinha said.

"Yeah, he's scary. Just being here is giving me the shivers," Lahti added.

Only the two of them had disembarked. Today, Inglis had planned to cut the tail herself, so she'd left Leone and the others working at the camp. Along with the usual butchering and preserving of meat, the group was working hard to seriously transform the camp into a town. Therefore, Inglis had only asked Rafinha, needed for her Gift following the tail cutting, to come along. Lahti had planned to bring food to the nearby settlements, but since he had some time to wait for the preparations, he'd asked to come along as the pilot of the *Star Princess*.

"Really?" Rafinha asked. "I mean, the big guy certainly is

impressive, but he's kind of cute when he's docile like this. A bit different from a magicite beast, don't you think?"

"I don't get you at all. Just being close to him is making me feel a little sick," Lahti said.

"Yeah, you don't look so good. Are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah... I'll be fine, let's just get this over with..."

"Okay." Rafinha turned to Inglis. "Chris, what's going on?"

"I'm not sure. He doesn't want to fight. He said if we want the tail, to cut it off and take it," Inglis replied.

"What?! Really?!"

"Yeah, and we had a little talk."

"About what?"

"Doesn't really matter. Let's get to the fighting."

"No, no, wait! Stop getting ahead of yourself! If he's giving us his tail without fighting, that means he understands what's going on and he's willing to help those in need, right? You convinced him to do that, didn't you? That's great! I'm impressed!"

"Yeah, that's awesome!" Lahti chimed in. "That means he won't go on a rampage and attack the camp or any of the settlements scattered around!"

"Hm? Uhh..." Inglis began. Fufailbane had refused to fight, but he'd said nothing about understanding their situation or wanting to help out. It was just Rafinha's inclination to see the good in everyone that led her to interpret it as such.

Regardless, his plan was to take advantage of his long lifespan, wait for Inglis to age, and in the meantime, avoid accelerating her growth. He wouldn't give her the chance for the best method of training—namely, actual fighting.

It was difficult to imagine such a huge dragon coming up with such a delicate scheme. It left Inglis in shock and dismay. Ancient dragons were, perhaps, a bit *too* clever. She'd prefer that they were a bit more instinctive, a bit more visceral.

Maybe a little bit of exposure to the Prism Flow would lead him to attack people instinctively, like magicite beasts did. Perhaps then he'd attack her on sight rather than waiting for her to age. However, would exposure to the Prism Flow spoil the quality of his superb meat? That would be its own problem.

"Uhhh, I don't know... I don't think he said anything about that..."

"I do not recall being asked to cooperate! Challenged, beaten, chained, my tail lopped off and stolen away, but you said nothing about cooperation!"

"Don't say things like that. People will get the wrong idea!" Inglis said.

Not that she could really argue against his point. From the

beginning, she'd given up on negotiation, expecting that there was no way he'd simply cooperate.

"Huh? Did I just hear something?" Lahti seemed confused.

"Hear what?" Rafinha asked.

"It was, like, 'You said nothing about cooperation...' Was that the dragon?! Didn't you hear it?!" Lahti exclaimed.

"I didn't hear anything."

"Was it just me? Inglis, you must have heard it."

"Hmm..." Inglis began. "So you can hear him too, Lahti..."

This was unexpected, but there was no mistaking it; Lahti, too, had gained dragon lore from eating Fufailbane's meat. Without dragon lore, he wouldn't have been able to hear Fufailbane's voice. It might have been audible if the dragon was deliberately making it so, but then Rafinha would have heard it too.

She didn't know whether Lahti's dragon lore was nearly on par with Fufailbane's—like her own—but it seemed that unlike Inglis or Rafinha, he'd gained a glimpse of that power through normal human levels of consumption. Therefore, something about him must have been more compatible with that power. Perhaps it had something to do with him being Runeless? With only one example, it was hard to say.

"Hey, Lahti, what's the dragon saying?" Rafinha asked.

"Something like, 'Beaten, chained, my tail lopped off, but you said nothing about cooperation!'"

"*Chriiis?*" Rafinha shot Inglis a glare. "Does this dragon happen to be a nice person whom you're just forcing to fight even though he doesn't want to?"

"No, no, no, Rani, you've got it wrong! He was trying to eat me! So..."

"That is true. I didn't want to, but that girl forced me..."

"Hmm?!" Lahti began. "I think he's saying, 'I didn't want to, but she forced me.'"

"C'mon! Chris! Why are you lying? That's not right!" Rafinha pulled at Inglis's ears.

"Ow, ow! No! *He's* lying!" Inglis insisted.

"What?!" Rafinha gasped.

"I misjudged you!" Inglis yelled at Fufailbane. "I can't believe an ancient dragon would lie like that!"

"Hmph. After all you've done, the least you could do is overlook something this minor."

"Absolutely not! You're going to make it up to me with an all-out fight!" Inglis declared.

"How many times do I have to say it? I will not fight you."

"Grrr... You're so stubborn!"

Meanwhile, Lahti was interpreting for Rafinha. “It seems like Inglis was right—he *was* lying. But he says he won’t fight now.”

“Oh, okay...” Rafinha replied. “Anyway, Chris. Let’s stop this. We get the tail either way, right? So why don’t we just thank him and go home? Maybe we can be friends in the future.”

“No,” Inglis protested. “An ancient dragon isn’t that friendly.”

“Foolish girl! I would eat you now if nothing held me back!”

“Don’t forget my warning. And Lahti, don’t translate that.”

“Y-Yeah...”

“Hmph...”

Inglis concluded it would be best to give up on fighting for the day and take the tail as Rafinha had suggested. “Then, as you kindly offered, we’ll be taking—”

Just as Inglis began speaking, a human form flew toward them with white wings from an Artifact’s Gift. It was Liselotte, agitated and out of breath. “Wait! Lahti, there’s trouble! Please return to the camp at once!”

She must have rushed at full speed. Whatever it was, it seemed to be serious.

“Hm?! What happened?!”

“The encampment’s residents are creating quite the stir! Sir Lewin and the others are trying to calm them down, but it’s not having much of an effect. I think it would be for the best if you spoke to them, Lahti.”

“What?! Okay, I’ll be right there! But how did this happen?”

Liselotte paused, conflicted. “I’m sorry to say this, but it concerns Pullum... It seems the people haven’t yet put the matter of Harim out of their minds. They’re demanding to know why his kin is sheltered here.”

Lahti gasped. “So they want to chase her out?!”

“If only that were all...” Liselotte replied, cryptic. From the look in her eyes, Inglis could make a guess.

“I assume they are calling for her imprisonment and execution?” Inglis said.

“Ah...! Y-Yes... Indeed they are...” Liselotte nodded, worried.

Such a demand wasn’t unthinkable. The camp had been attracting many people from the surrounding area, and it was no longer just a base of operation for Inglis, her friends, Lewin, and the surviving knights. They had already begun the process of turning the encampment into a new Leclair.

Some of the people who had moved to the encampment were survivors from Leclair, while others had lived in other towns but lost their homes and possessions to Tiffanyer’s acts and had nowhere else to turn. Each of them had their own story—but a chapter they all

shared was having experienced loss thanks to the deeds of Tiffanyer and her right-hand man, Harim.

Tiffanyer was a hialal menace from Highland, but closer to home, Harim had once been a powerful noble of their own country. It was no wonder that his acts would be taken as rebellion—as treason, even. In such a case, it was not uncommon for the entire family to be held responsible. Nor was it surprising that the people he'd harmed would call for retributive justice.

That so many had gathered was proof of Lahti's growing reputation, but that also meant greater crowds had happened to see Pullum with their own eyes. She had been trying to lay low in consideration of their feelings, but it seemed like things had come to a head.

"Dammit! Why do they have to do this now?!" Lahti said.

"This is awful! We need to stop them!" Rafinha agreed.

"You were going to have to face this sooner or later," Inglis said. "Keep calm, Lahti."

"O-Of course! I know!"

"And there's more," Liselotte continued. "Ian is leading the protestors."

"What?! Ian?!" Lahti gasped.

"Ian's...?!" Rafinha was just as surprised.

"What's he after?" Inglis asked. Even she did not immediately understand why Ian, who had kidnapped Pullum and taken her to Harim during their march to Leclair, would reappear at the head of such protests.

"Anyway, we must hurry! Let us return to the camp!"

Liselotte was right. Inglis and the others bound Fufailbane again and returned to their encampment immediately.

Chapter VI: Inglis, Age 15—The Ancient Dragon and the (Former) Old King (6)

The encampment had begun as a place for pitching tents in a forest clearing, where they'd unloaded the Flygear Port and sheltered from snowstorms. At this point, it had several large temporary houses providing a place to sleep for the people staying here. Because the number of people who had heard of Prince Lahti's liberation of Leclair was steadily growing with each passing day, the housing they had available still wasn't enough.

Fortunately, plans were already underway to expand. Work had already begun on the foundation for the full-scale construction of a castle large enough to accommodate many people. Their numbers were already growing; there were certainly at least a hundred people gathered, possibly even several hundred.

The new Leclair had enough food stockpiled to feed everyone, thanks to the meat from Fufailbane. It would last for months, perhaps even a full year. Enough to hold out for the time being, which would allow time for the food situation in the surrounding countryside to improve.

A commotion was taking place by one of the temporary houses, built from wood cut from the surrounding forest—the house in which Inglis and her friends resided. A crowd surrounded it, their voices filled with anger. A squad of knights serving Lahti formed a defensive wall in front, protecting the person behind them.

That person was, of course, Pullum. The gathered crowd insisted she not be allowed to stay there, given that she was related to Harim, who had ravaged the land and destroyed their livelihoods. Leone was close at Pullum's side, supporting her both physically and mentally.

"I'm so sorry. I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Pullum, tears in her eyes, bowed deeply in apology to the people over and over, but that didn't seem to be enough to quell their rage.

"Talk is cheap!"

"That's right! You're Harim's little sister! He ruined our lives! How is an apology supposed to help?!"

"Yeah! Someone needs to be held responsible for this!"

The stares of the people in the crowd held deep pain and

resentment with no other outlet.

Leone had decided she'd act as Pullum's shield, protecting her as best she could, even if she couldn't fix the problem. She placed herself in front of Pullum, guarding her. It was as if she were back in Ahlemin as her younger self. Having been in a similar position, she was insistent on being there for her friend.

"Pullum! It's dangerous out here! We should go inside for now!" Leone insisted.

"No. I need to face them! I need to apologize for the pain my brother's caused!"

"Listen to me, Pullum. It's really getting dangerous!" Leone feared if something didn't change soon, the people gathered might riot.

A clash with the people would tarnish Lahti's reputation while he was trying to improve it by rebuilding Leclair. More importantly, it would lump more hardship upon those who had already lost their homes and families. Leone didn't want such suffering to continue. She had seen so much misfortune on her way to Leclair.

"Calm down, everyone!" Lewin called out to the crowd as he led the knights. "Pullum may be Harim's sister, but she had no part in what he did! Quite the opposite, she joined in the fight to free Leclair! She saved our lives! Can you truly call it justice to lay Harim's sins at her feet?! Please, reconsider!"

"Don't worry!" a slender and attractive young man yelled from the crowd, encouraging the masses. "We are in the right! Since time immemorial, responsibility for treason has rested upon the whole family! And Harim's sins are that grave! The anger, the sorrow we all feel—she must be dealt with harshly to prevent such things from ever happening again! To prevent a second, a third Harim from ever being born! For the sake of our future, we cannot allow her to be forgiven! This is not an angry outburst! This is a necessary step for our future!"

It was Ian.

"Ian! Why would you say such things?!" Leone cried. "You grew up with Pullum! You were friends! If anything, now is the time for you to help her!"

"That's where you're wrong! Crimes are crimes! And those who commit them must atone! Friend or no, I won't hold back! I don't care if you question my friendship with her! If anything, it makes me suspect you're all actually plotting something with Harim!"

"Wha—?! What are you talking about?! You traveled with us! You know that's not true!" Leone was so angry that she grabbed the hilt of her greatsword without thinking.

Worried things were about to get out of hand, Pullum clung to Leone. "Leone! Please stop!"

"I know how you feel!" Lewin said to Leone. "But stay calm. If we

attack the people here, it will reflect poorly on Prince Lahti! It might even jeopardize the rebuilding of Leclair! So please hold back!"

"R-Right," Leone answered. "I'm sorry. I understand."

As she dropped her hand from the hilt, Ian raised his voice. "Ah, so trusting! What makes you think *I* won't attack?!"

Blades sprung forth from Ian's arms as he suddenly activated something. Most of his body was made of Flygear-like machinery—technology from Highland. Ian having weapons inside himself came as no surprise.

With blades unsheathed, Ian rushed toward Lewin, who stood at the center of the line of knights. "Out of my way!"

"Huh?!"

"Stop! Ian!" Leone yelled.

Claaang!

Leone's greatsword extended forth between Lewin and Ian just in time. Ian's blades clashed against it and failed to reach Lewin. The crowd cried out in discontent as they watched Ian attack the knights.

"Th-Thanks, Leone!" Lewin gasped.

"That was close. Get back! This could be bad!" Leone returned her blade to its normal length, and stepped in between Ian and Lewin. "It's dangerous here! Everyone, get out of here!"

Between Leone's warning and Ian's actions, the crowd was mostly dispersing. One of its braver members stayed to object to Ian. "Hey, hold it! You don't have to go that far! We need to keep negotiating!"

"Hmph." With a cruel sniff, Ian's blade stretched forth. "How bothersome. Be silent!"

With a wave of Ian's right arm, the blade sliced toward the brave youth. His other arm was already blocking Leone's sword, preventing her from reacting quickly enough.

"A-Aaaaaah!"

"Look out!" Pullum cried out, leaping in front of the youth to cover him. Ian's blade stabbed Pullum instead, piercing her in the back. She collapsed, a crimson stain spreading on the back of her clothes.

"Lady Pullum?!" Lewin gasped.

"Pullum?! Ian, how could you?! Don't you realize what you've done?!" Leone swung her greatsword at Ian's waist with all her might, knocking him back.

"Guh!" he grunted.

In that momentary opening, Leone rushed to Pullum's side. "Pullum! Are you okay?!"

"I-I..." the boy stammered. Pullum turned to him, a faint smile on

her face.

“Are you all right? I’ll be fine... Please, get out of here...”

“O-Of course! I’m so sorry! This is my fault!”

“You’re in danger, Lady Pullum! That wound is deep. We need to treat you immediately!” Lewin said.

“Lewin, stop the bleeding! Rafinha will be back soon. Pullum needs to hold on until then!” Leone said.

Liselotte was on her way to call Lahti back. Surely Inglis and Rafinha would return with him. Even for a wound as grave as Pullum’s, Rafinha’s healing Gift would probably be able to help.

“Understood! Leave it to me! You handle Ian!”

“I will. I’ll stop him. I’ll take him down!” Leone gripped her greatsword with all her strength and leveled it at Ian, whom she’d swatted away earlier. He was sitting up now.

He grasped his head with his hands as if in pain. “D-Do it, Leone! I... I can’t... How could I do that to Pullum?! Ugh...!”

“Ian?!”

“Hurry and finish me off! Otherwise...! E-Evel’s experiments... They transfer part of his will into the subject—to control them... So, I...”

“Evel?!” Leone hadn’t met him in person, but she’d heard his name. He was a Highland military commander. She’d heard the Steelblood Front’s black-masked leader had put an end to him after he’d been at the center of Highland’s plots in Alcard. To begin with, Tiffanyer had gone to Alcard only as his replacement. “What do you mean?! When you kidnapped Pullum and disappeared, was that Evel’s influence too?!”

“Lord Evel’s will awakened within me... Telling me to take Pullum so that we could draw you to Leclair! Apparently, his preparations would be complete then!”

“Preparations?! For what?!”

“That’s—ugh...”

“Ian!”

Ian stopped with a snap, then rose to his feet quickly. “Who knows! Figure it out for yourself!” A pipelike object projected from his palm as he thrust it toward Leone, from which bullets of light fired. Not just one or two, but a continuous stream of bullets soared at her.

“Ah!”

Leone assumed Ian’s consciousness had been hijacked again. Either way, she had to block the bullets. If she dodged, they would hit Pullum and Lewin behind her. “Yaaaah!” she shouted as she used her greatsword to cut through the bullets. As she did, each one exploded, sending a shock through her arms, but she could endure that.

I need to hold out and look for a chance to counterattack! she

thought.

“Then how about this!” Ian taunted. He swung his other palm forward, pointing another barrel at her.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat!

The stream of bullets doubled, turning into a barrage.

Leone gasped. *Even if I speed up, it will overwhelm me! I won't be able to keep up! If I miss one, it's all over. It'll kill Pullum behind me—but I won't let that happen!*

“O blade!”

She plunged her sword into the ground in front of her and made its blade grow wide. It was enough to completely cover her, serving as a shield for her and Pullum. She was using her Gift defensively. The bullets of light rang off the blade, and she used her hips to brace for the impact. She could endure. By holding out like this, she could buy time for Rafinha to return. A stalemate wasn't a bad situation for Leone. Her foe seemed to understand that as well.

“Are you trying to stall this out? I'll show you how fruitless that is!”

His voice came from somewhere close. With her sword as a shield, it was hard for her to see Ian. He had stopped firing and closed in, running in her blind spot.

“But if you want a close-in fight...” Leone began.

“Oh, that's not what I'm after!” Ian proclaimed smugly.

Then the world around Leone vanished. She was no longer in the camp, glittering with frost. She found herself in a dark void.

This is—

“Another dimension?!” Leone's greatsword Artifact had a Gift which created a separate dimension, so she was familiar with shifting dimensions. However, there was one detail that did not occur when she used that Gift: here, the darkness was filled with shimmering yellow-green particles.

“Ah!” She remembered now, and the thought sent chills down her spine. These particles had the effect of sealing away Artifacts' powers. She'd experienced this when Ambassador Theodore's predecessor, Muenthe, had been attacked. Her own greatsword would be nothing but a wedge of steel here.

“What in the world is going on?!” Lewin asked. He and Pullum had been sucked into the alternate dimension while he'd been administering first aid. This meant that when Rafinha returned, she wouldn't be able to find Pullum to heal her.

“This is a Highlander power! In here, our Artifacts are sealed! We can't use them!” Leone explained.

“What?! Can we handle this?!”

“I don’t know!”

This was bad—very bad. If they couldn’t defeat Ian without relying on their Artifacts’ powers, she, Pullum, and Lewin would be trapped beyond all help. If she’d known Ian was capable of this, rather than trying to buy time, she would have finished him off with one mighty strike. It was too late for regrets, though.

“I won’t give up! It’ll take more than this!” Leone faced Ian, her sword at the ready. Without its Gift, it was heavier than usual, but she could still swing it.

And swing it she would.

A magicite beast was immune to physical attacks that didn’t have the power of an Artifact, but Ian wasn’t a magicite beast. If she gave up now, not only would her own life be forfeit, but so would Pullum’s and Lewin’s. She refused to let that happen.

She had her own reasons to survive. She needed to defeat her traitorous brother, Leon, with her own hands, to wipe the shame away from the Olfa name. That was what she’d trained so hard for. She couldn’t die before she accomplished that. And if she held out long enough, Inglis just might notice this dimension and come to help. So she had to believe, and fight on! “Yaaah!”

Ian leaped back to avoid Leone’s slash. Normally, she could extend her sword’s blade for an immediate follow-up, but now that was impossible. To pursue, she’d have to close the distance with her own feet. Leone rushed forth, but Ian immediately moved to hold her back.

“How pitiful... In this Sealed Cage, you’re powerless! Let’s see how you handle this now!” Ian thrust forth his right palm and fired more bullets of light.

“Ah!” Leone, unlike before, did not attempt to cut the bullets down midflight. Instead, she twisted her body to avoid the trajectory, doing so at the very last moment to minimize the openings left. Thanks to Lewin and Pullum no longer being behind her, she could safely dodge.

She was having a harder time now that the powers of her Artifact were sealed. She was clearly at a disadvantage. As soon as she dodged one bullet, a new one bore down on her, which she quickly dodged to one side or the other over and over, taking care not to bring Pullum and Lewin within the field of fire.

“I see... Get fired up, but keep my cool!”

Stay calm, watch the overall situation, and take the best available choice at each step—Inglis had told Leone that this was important for her, and that advice had just sprung to mind.

Inglis trained tirelessly every day, and sometimes Leone joined

her. During one of those sessions, Inglis had given her some food for thought. Whenever Leone found herself at a disadvantage, she worked harder, not smarter. Trying hard was important, but it also narrowed her vision—or so Inglis had said.

If someone as talented as Inglis had said so, Leone figured it must be true. At first, Leone had thought to grit her teeth and struggle through slashing away the bullets. It was only when Inglis's words came to mind that she changed course and decided to evade.

Ian mocked her as he watched her run, dodging the bullets. “Do you think you can just scurry around like that until your friends arrive?!” He switched targets, aiming at the motionless Pullum and Lewin.

“No!” Leone cried.

“How about this?”

“Stop! You coward! I’m the one fighting you!”

“Yes, exactly. If I fire at them, a kind girl like you will throw herself in front of them rather than abandoning them. I’ll hit my target in the end. That will speed things up, won’t it? It’s not cowardly; it’s efficient.”

“Ugh...!” *So, what do I do now?* Before Leone could decide on a course of action, Ian made his move.

Rrrummmble!

The barrel shook and roared as a bullet formed, many times larger than before. Ian was charging power in his palm.

“Now, then... Pullum is going to be in a lot of trouble. Please do save her.” Ian, grinning, fired off the huge bullet of light toward Pullum and Lewin.

Leone was already moving toward its trajectory. “Lewin! You need to get out of the way at least!”

She swung her sword. Maybe because of the urgency of the moment, it wasn’t heavy at all. She was filled with do-or-die adrenaline.

Leone didn’t know what the best course of action was right now, but she knew what she *had* to do. With its power as an Artifact sealed away, the sword couldn’t cut through bullets of light, couldn’t swat them away, but that didn’t matter. She wouldn’t abandon Pullum.

“Hyaaaah!” With every bit of strength she had, she slashed at the bullet. And—

Fwoosh!

The bullet, cleaved in two with little effort, evaporated.



“Huh? N-No way!” Leone gasped. She was the one most surprised by what had happened. Her sword didn’t have any special powers active. Furthermore, the bullet was even stronger than before. There was no way she could have cut through it so easily. She had expected to lose her grip on the sword when the bullet struck it.

No matter how much she racked her brain, she couldn’t figure out how that had happened. It was impossible.

“Whaaaaat?!” Ian’s eyes went wide.

But Leone’s astonishment didn’t end here. In the wake of the path of the blade she’d swung so intensely were translucent white scars in the dark void. They swelled, changing in shape, and became a gigantic dragon’s jaw.

“Wh-What is this?! Is that the dragon’s ph-phantasm?!” Leone stammered. She didn’t understand it at all, but where she had swung her sword down, a phantasm appeared. She didn’t understand how, but there was no other way to describe it.

And as the sword’s tip struck the floor, it also created a complex shape resembling a dragon’s jaw there as ornamentation. Had the sword’s transformation been so powerful that it had not only cut through the bullet but also created a phantasm? At any rate, the phantasm created by Leone was just like those she’d seen around Fufailbane. It roared at its enemies, bore its fangs, and attacked.

“Graaahhhh!”

The phantasm rushed suddenly toward Ian, taking a bite out of him that shredded his right hand and half of his body. As if satisfied, the phantasm faded away.

“Wha—?! What’s going on?! How?!” With half his body shredded, Ian collapsed to the ground. Because his body was made of machinery, he probably wouldn’t die from this, but it would keep him from moving.

“A-All right!” Lewin called out. “That Artifact-sealing or whatever didn’t work!”

“N-No, that’s not it!” Leone refuted. “My Artifact is still sealed. That was some other power!”

The world around them shifted back to the snowy camp. Her attack had been powerful enough to destroy the source of Ian’s power.

“Leone!” Voices rang out from above her head. Inglis and the others had just gotten back. Leone could spot Inglis, Rafinha, and Lahti aboard the *Star Princess* while Liselotte was flying with her Gift’s wings.

“Everyone... I’m so glad to see you!” Leone called out. “Rafinha,

you need to heal Pullum's injury!"

"Huh?!" Rafinha responded. "Pullum's hurt?!"

"Wh-What happened?!" Lahti sputtered.

"Prince Lahti!" Lewin said. "Lady Pullum protected one of the civilians and was struck by that man's blade!"

"Ian?! But why? Why?!" Lahti looked at the remaining half of Ian, in utter shock.

"I'll explain later!" Leone said. "We need to treat her soon, or her life will be in danger!"

"G-Got it! Leave it to me! C'mon, Lahti, you help!" Rafinha urged.

"Of course!"

Rafinha and Lahti leaped down from the *Star Princess* and rushed to Pullum's side in a panic. Inglis, Liselotte, and Leone joined, forming a circle around her.

Her face a ghastly pale color, Pullum attempted a brave smile.

"Ah, Lahti... I'm sorry to cause you trouble like this... This is why you always call me clumsy."

"You dummy, this isn't the time to say that! S-Sorry... If I had done my job better, this wouldn't have happened... If I had been clear about things sooner...!"

As Lahti's voice wavered, Rafinha slapped his back in a show of encouragement. "Don't worry! It's okay, I'm going to save her! C'mon, quit moping and hold her hand! If she feels safe, it will help her heal better!" Rafinha activated the Gift, and the light of healing gathered in her palm.

"Okay... Please, save Pullum!"

"Okay!"

As she watched them, Inglis thought, *She must be getting pretty used to the Gift. The light gathers far faster and shines far brighter than it did at first. She's mastered the technique of combining Gifts to use healing arrows as well. Her progress is remarkable.*

I'm sure she'll be able to save Pullum. We can leave this to her.

Inglis turned her attention toward Leone and Ian. "Are you okay, Leone?"

"You're unhurt, I hope?" Liselotte asked.

Leone nodded. "Yes, somehow... Though I was nervous when I was caught in the Highlander Sealed Cage."

"Wow! Great job!" Inglis cheered.

"Oh, is that what their sealing of Artifacts is called? Yes, as Inglis said, excellent work," Liselotte said.

"I'm not really sure how I did it... My sword changed, somehow. It's a lot sharper than it was before, and the shape is different." Leone pointed to the tip of her sword, where the dragon's-jaw-shaped decoration remained.

“Hmm? What’s that?” Inglis asked.

“I swung my sword as hard as I could, and a phantasm appeared from it.”

“Whaaaaat?! Wh-What in the world...?” Liselotte began.

“So Fufailbane’s dragon lore rests in that sword now... And it even changed its shape. Dragon lore is a different power from the mana that Artifacts use, so the Sealed Cage didn’t affect it,” Inglis explained.

“A dragon’s power... Dragon lore, you say? How did that end up in my sword?” Leone asked.

“You’ve cut lots of dragon meat, right? I think by cutting a dragon that much, its power entered the sword.”

Leone had used her sword in place of a cleaver every day when she butchered Fufailbane’s meat. It was a humble, difficult job, but one vital to getting food to the inhabitants of nearby settlements. Hard work for someone else’s sake—as earnest and serious as Leone was, there was no way she would cut corners on it, and she’d continued to do it without a single complaint, even though it left her drenched in sweat. And this was, in a way, the reward for her hard work.

“Is that how it works?” Leone asked, dubious.

“Yeah, seems like it,” Inglis answered. “I’ve never actually seen such a thing before, but...” Inglis had taken the dragon lore into herself, and she had suspicions that Lahti had as well, but it seemed that in Leone’s case it had entered her greatsword instead.

A human given power by the gods became a divine knight. A sword blessed by the gods was a holy sword. It was also said that a sword became a dark blade once it slew a god. Perhaps dragons were similar enough. Maybe they *could* be described as something close to gods.

“It saved me, so I’m not complaining. I should be grateful, right?”

“Right, right. Getting stronger is good! Can you try it out when we’re training together? I’d really like to see it in action. C’mon, can you?”

“Er... Okay, but... Ha ha ha ha, don’t light up like that at the idea.”

“Anyway...” Liselotte interrupted to ask the obvious question.

“Why would Ian do something like that?”

“Oh, right!” Leone answered. “It seems like he’s being controlled... I couldn’t tell if he was being sincere, but at one point, he clutched himself in pain and said that it was Evel’s will, that he’d kidnapped Pullum because of Evel to make time for some kind of preparation. I don’t really know all the details, but...”

“Evel’s will?! Preparations?” Inglis pressed.

“Well, that has an unsettling sound to it...” Liselotte said.

“Yes,” Inglis agreed. “Ha ha ha, it’s been a while...” Her face lit up

on its own.

Evel. Plans. Preparations. A normal person would conclude that nothing good was about to happen—at least, all the others present did. As for Inglis, this brought forth the idea of a new sparring partner. She was already looking forward to it.

“And that grin has an unsettling look to it...” Liselotte added.

“Well, that’s just how Inglis is,” Leone said. “Anyway, Ian said to hurry and finish him off when he was in pain... But I couldn’t, and then he attacked me again, and now...” She trailed off, dejected.

“Y-You don’t need to worry about it... Thank you for stopping me. I don’t want to hurt my friends... I don’t want to hurt Pullum any more...” Ian gasped for air as he kept speaking.

“Ian!” Leone said.

“Stay away! I don’t know when he’ll make me self-destruct. After all, I’m no longer of any use to him. The preparations are complete... All that was left was to cause a small distraction and draw your attention... Don’t worry about me. There’s no reason to be upset over what you’ve done to me...”

“Ian, what do you mean by ‘preparations’? What’s Evel plotting?” Inglis asked.

Ian turned his gaze to her. It was cold and sharp—not like him at all. This arrogance was definitely Evel’s. “You’ll understand soon! Inglis! I’m sure someone like *you* will love it! So just sit back and watch!”

After a pause, Inglis replied, “Then I suppose I will.”

That is, unless Rafinha objects. Inglis didn’t particularly care about good or evil as long as she had a strong opponent, but she couldn’t ignore Rafinha’s opinions on the matter. In fact, they were her top priority. Watching over her adored Rafinha as she matured was the other pillar of Inglis Eucus’s existence.

“I don’t need this blabbermouth toy anymore! Time to clean him up! Leaving too many around isn’t my style!” Ian’s body began to glow brightly and swell.

“Don’t get close! Stay away from him!” Inglis shouted. Ian’s warning had been right. They’d be hurt if they were too close when he self-destructed.

Ian’s calm tone of voice returned as he weakly spoke. “It was all set up from the beginning... I should have shared my fate with Leclair... Everything I’ve done since then has been a mistake...but now, in the end...I’m finally home... Inglis. Everyone. I have one last request... Take care of Lahti, Pullum, this country...” He gave one last smile.

The group listened closely.

“Yes...”

“Ian...”

“Ian!”

Lahti, attending to Pullum, couldn't bear to watch. “Ian, I don't know what's gonna happen, but I'm gonna bring back Leclair to how it was! So... So...!”

“I know you will, Lahti... I'm looking forward to it...”

Boooooooooom!

The light swelled and exploded, creating a loud noise and smoke. Everyone closed their eyes from the glare, and when they opened them again, there was no sign of Ian left—only a smoldering patch on the ground, on which fell a shower of machine parts.

“Taaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!”

Lahti stared at his lost friend, the sorrow overwhelming him. Ian was gone.

“Ugh...! Ian...” Leone bit her lip.

“To the Highlanders, we're all just...” Liselotte said, her eyes downcast.

Rafinha rose from kneeling beside Pullum, her eyes ablaze with anger. “I will *never* forgive Evel for this! Even death doesn't teach him a lesson!”

“Rani, will Pullum be okay?” Inglis asked.

“Yeah, she seems good. She healed a lot faster than I expected.”

Perhaps that too was thanks to the power of dragon lore. It wouldn't be at all surprising to Inglis if Rafinha, who'd eaten just as much dragon meat as she had, had been affected. Rafinha hadn't seemed to hear Fufailbane's voice earlier, but maybe the dragon lore had awakened in her only now. Or maybe she had a form of power that didn't allow her to hear a dragon's voice—Inglis wasn't sure.

“Pullum will be fine,” Rafinha reiterated. “She's just exhausted and sleeping now. Lahti, get her to her room and make sure she gets lots of rest. She'll catch a cold out here.”

“Got it!” Lahti responded. “Thanks so much. I owe you.”

“Prince, I'll help as well!”

“Thanks, Lewin!” Lahti said, as he and Lewin worked together to move Pullum to safety inside.

“All right, Chris! Let's avenge Ian!” Rafinha exclaimed. “Where's Evel?!”

Inglis paused in thought. “I'm not sure yet, but I expect he'll show up...over there.” She pointed in the direction from which they had returned—that is, the crater in the ruins of Leclair where Fufailbane was bound.

The hial menace Tiffanyer, Evel's replacement, who took away

Leclair with the Floating Circle, had said she'd inherited the plan from him. However, she had given no indication that she knew Fufailbane was sealed below. She hadn't been on particularly good terms with Evel, so he probably hadn't informed her, whereas he himself must have known about the ancient dragon, considering he'd authored the planned takeover of Leclair. That he would have coincidentally set his sights on land that happened to have an ancient dragon buried beneath was implausible. It was far more reasonable to assume he knew. And if he did, his primary objective must have been Fufailbane. Therefore, when he finally showed himself once again, it would be in front of the dragon. In Inglis's mind, it was a simple thing to guess.

"I'm sure he wants to do something to the ancient dragon—to Fufailbane," Inglis said.

"Huh?! That's no good! Not when we finally got Fufailbane to understand our perspective! If anything happens, we won't be able to get any more of that delicious meat!"

"Well, we do have some stored up, but more importantly..."

For Inglis, it was a serious problem that Fufailbane had lost the will to fight her. She'd really appreciate it if the dragon, sensing an opportunity, would join forces with Evel and attack. Evel wasn't as strong as Fufailbane, but he was powerful in his own right. Maybe she had some kind of chance at a battle. However, she didn't know what kind of condition Evel was in after his ostensible death.

"More importantly?" Rafinha asked.

"Oh, uh, nothing..." Inglis wouldn't *not* be entertained by letting Evel do whatever he was planning.

"Hold on a second, Chris. You're not thinking, 'If we just leave him alone for a while, I'll get to fight someone strong! ♪' are you?"

"What?! No way, of course not. Just, um, thinking long-term, it'd be best to see everything he's got and then report back to Rafael and Ambassador Theodore, right? Let him put all his cards on the table."

"Absolutely not! Being that lax is how you got the royal theater blown up! Stop worrying about the future; focus on the now. For Ian's sake! To keep anything else terrible from happening to Leclair! We need to stop Evel's schemes! Let's go!" Rafinha grabbed Inglis's hand and pulled her along.

Inglis couldn't refute that argument—both from the standpoint of being a squire, and from the standpoint of its being a request from her adorable little Rafinha. "Okay, got it."

Inglis and Rafinha climbed back aboard the *Star Princess*. Leone joined them, and while there was no room for Liselotte, she could fly alongside with her Gift-given wings. As the *Star Princess* climbed high into the sky, she gripped the railing and prepared to follow.

"Let's hurry!" Just as Rafinha, at the controls, set the Flygear in

motion—

Rrrrrrrumble!

The earth shook. The snow on top and the trees surrounding them trembled.

The center point of the rumbling was where Inglis had pointed earlier—where Fufailbane was bound.

The earth cracked and split wider.

“Wh-What?!” Inglis gasped.

“Is there something underground?!” Leone asked.

“I don’t know, but it looks big!” Rafinha said.

“We need to hurry!” Liselotte urged.

But it was too late.

“Gwohhhh!”

A swarm of pale, transparent dragon heads sprang up as if to block Inglis and the others.

“Phantasms!” Inglis said.

“Of all the times for them to get in the way...” Rafinha complained.

“I’ll clear a path! Everyone else, go on ahead!” Liselotte kicked off the Flygear’s hull, using the momentum this imparted to charge forward. “Yaaaaaah!” Her halberd, thrusting forth, gleamed a faint light blue.



Fwoosh!

A fierce and bright blizzard swallowed the phantasms. Frozen in place, they then broke apart with a crackling sound.

“Wh-What in the world happened?!” Liselotte exclaimed, grasping back onto the *Star Princess* as it passed by.

“So you got it too, Liselotte! This is dragon lore! Wouldn’t you say so, Inglis?” Leone asked.

“Yeah, looks like it.” Taking a closer look at Liselotte’s halberd, Inglis saw that part of the ax head of the halberd now resembled a dragon’s jaw. The same transformation had occurred with Leone’s greatsword.

For Liselotte, rather than creating phantasms, it produced an effect like a dragon’s breath.

“Oh, it’s because you cut just as much dragon flesh with your Artifact as I did with mine!” Leone said.

“I-I see. I wasn’t especially pleased with using my Artifact, the symbol of a knight’s pride, as a mere cleaver, but I’m glad I kept at it!” Liselotte happily set her cheek on the newly empowered halberd.

Rafinha pouted. “You two are so lucky! I wish my Artifact got stronger...but I guess bows can’t cut meat, huh?”

“Rafinha, you have the healing Gift that Ambassador Theodore prepared for your Artifact, remember? And you’ve been making so much progress with it. I felt like I was being left behind,” Liselotte said.

“But Leone has Theodore’s dimension Gift *and* power from the dragon meat! It’s no fair getting both!”

“Huh? N-No, I’m still—” Leone began.

Inglis chuckled. “It’s okay. You’re all working hard and making progress.”

The three were knights-to-be with upper-class Runes and upper-class Artifacts to match. Someday they would become ranking knights with command of large units. Already their individual prowess was on par with the most seasoned of knights in their Rune class. Inglis thought that if hial menaces were taken out of the picture, they might even become as strong as holy knights. That would be wonderful! They’d be the perfect training partners for her, so she really wanted them to keep at it.

Inglis laughed. “Work hard, get strong, and we can practice together.”

“H-Hey, that’s not as cute as you think it is,” Rafinha said. “Just what horrific training do you have planned for us?”

“Y-Yeah... Please take it easy on us,” Leone agreed.

“As normal people, it’s hard for us to keep up with you. Not like we could run with Flygears on our backs or anything,” Liselotte said.

Krrr-boom!

A loud rumble echoed through the air. The ground near Fufailbane cracked, then collapsed as a huge form rose from within.

“Ah! Something’s coming!” Inglis shouted.

“What is that?! It’s huge!” Rafinha gasped.

She’s right, Inglis thought. The thing rising was nearly as big as Fufailbane himself.

“It looks like a dragon?! B-But...” Leone stammered in disbelief. They were all staring at something that was definitely shaped like a dragon.

“A rainbow-colored body?! Could it be...?!” Liselotte said.

All three girls are right, actually, Inglis thought. It gleamed in the colors of the rainbow.

“A Prismer!” Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte all called out, shocked.

“Oh no! Why now?!” Rafinha asked.

“This must be the Prismer Ian said destroyed Leclair!” Leone said. “Has it been burrowed there this whole time?!”

“I-In any case, this is terrible! We must defend the camp! There are so many civilians there!” Liselotte said.

“But there’s a bright side to this, right, Chris?” Rafinha confirmed. “You didn’t get to fight the dragon, but now you get to fight *that*! Don’t hold back now!”

“No. It’s not like that, Rani,” Inglis replied.

“Huh? Why?”

“That’s no Prismer...”

Inglis couldn’t sense the overwhelming power that she’d felt before from Prismers. For example, when she’d seen the rime-bound Prismer in Ahlemin, even encased in thick ice, she’d felt a swell of extraordinary power, as if it was condensed within its bindings. Even the larval Prismer she’d taken down in the Karelian capital of Chiral, while less intense, had shared this trait.

Whatever this was may have looked like a Prismer, but Inglis felt nothing that indicated it was one. Never mind not being a Prismer, it wasn’t even a magicite beast. Its flows of power were completely different.

“It seems like a fake,” Inglis concluded.

“A fake?!” Rafinha gasped.

“Really?” Leone said.

“Even though it looks so similar?” Liselotte asked.

“It’s not that it happens to look like a Prismer. It’s that it was

made to look like a Prismer,” Inglis replied.

And if it had been given such a shape, there had to be a reason. The “Prismer” which had destroyed Leclair was in fact no Prismer at all. Ian had said the current situation in Alcard had been set up from the beginning. This must have been what he had meant.

“Wh-What do you mean, Chris?” Rafinha asked.

“You’ll see when we get closer. Let’s hurry.”

“You seem thrilled about something!”

“Well, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to fight it!”

Whether it was a Prismer or not didn’t matter. She cared about two things: whether it was strong, and whether it would be up for a fight. The latter didn’t seem to present any problem.

With Fufailbane not wanting to fight, I’ve been hard up for an opponent. This is just fine, she thought.

“All right, full speed ahead! Booster mode!”

The *Star Princess* accelerated quickly, shooting toward the rainbow-colored creature. As those on board got a closer look, everyone but Inglis gasped.

“There’s machinery like a Flygear’s sticking out all over it?!” Rafinha noted.

“But other parts are flesh and blood!” Leone said.

“No gems like a magicite beast’s, however!” Liselotte said.

“Its form is reminiscent of a dragon... It’s probably the combination of a living dragon with Highland machinery. Ian was a human mixed with machinery; I think it’s like that,” Inglis surmised.

Its body was painted in colors similar to a Prismer’s, and embedded light sources gave it a similar look.

At first nobody spoke, but then the larger point behind Inglis’s words struck Rafinha. “Oh! So, Chris, it’s something from Highland?”

“Wait! Is this what originally attacked Leclair?!” Leone said.

Inglis nodded. “I think so. It’s disguised to look like a Prismer. This country hasn’t relied on Highland much, so the people here lack familiarity with such things. It’s not surprising they’d see this and take it as a Prismer.”

“I can’t believe it!” Rafinha exclaimed. “So even the destruction of Leclair from earlier was a Highland plot?!”

“Yeah. Probably Archlord Evel’s idea. That’s why Ian said in the end that it had all been orchestrated from the beginning. He must have realized somewhere along the way.”

“That’s terrible! But Ian tried so hard! It may not have been good for us in Karelia, but he even accepted that machinelike body to protect Alcard! All of that...for this...”

Since a Prismer had appeared in Alcard and destroyed Leclair, the government chose to seek power from Highland to strengthen their

defenses, but they had nothing they could reasonably offer for Artifacts and a hialar menace. Thus, they were forced to participate in Highland's plans, abandoning their previous friendly relations with Karelia to participate in a pincer attack along with Venefic. Ian had sacrificed everything, even his humanity, to move that plan forward for Alcard's sake.

Yet what had driven him—the destruction of Leclair by a Prismar—was itself a falsehood. His will, his spirit, had from the very beginning been twisted—likely by the hands of Evel.

“Evel won't get away with this! Where is he?! I don't know what's going on, but he has to still be alive, right?! This time we'll take him down!” Tears streamed from Rafinha's eyes as her anger for Ian's sake threatened to explode.

“Rani...” Before Inglis could console her, another voice responded to her shout.

“Ha ha ha ha! Quit joking around... As if anyone could stop me!” It was a boyish voice with an unfitting haughtiness. And it came from the head of the dragon-like fake Prismar. A boy with heterochromic eyes of red and blue suddenly stood there.

“Archlord Evel!” Inglis called out.

“*Him*? But he looks so young...” Leone asked.

“So that must mean this really was all set up by Highland to begin with!” Liselotte said.

“B-But— How?!” Rafinha asked. “He looks just the same as before! There's no way he could have survived as though it was nothing!”

“He must be the same as Ian...”

“What do you mean, Chris?” Rafinha paused to think. “Wait, he made more of himself?”

“Yeah, that's my guess...”

Unlike Ian, though, Evel seemed to be entirely flesh and blood. There weren't any visible mechanical parts. *With technology like that, I could make more copies of myself too*, Inglis thought. *Who wouldn't love to have a capable sparring partner always available?*

“I'm not a fan of just lining up clones like that piece of scrap. I prefer to be *me*,” Evel said.

Inglis posited that this Evel had only become active due to the defeat of the previous one by the black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front. In addition, he seemed to retain his memories from his other bodies—he remembered Inglis and Rafinha. Inglis wasn't sure how that was possible, but she wasn't concerned with that.

She paused, taking in the moment. “I suppose. But wouldn't it be more convenient to have another you?”

“Hmm. Inglis, I'm afraid I have to disagree,” he replied. “But

that's fine. After all, it shows at least one of us is a decent person!"

"How rude. Doesn't that imply that I'm the one who's not?"

"I can't argue with that..." Rafinha interjected.

"C'mon, Rani! Back me up!"

"Nope, I can't have your back on this one, but..." Rafinha shifted back to her original point. "Anyway, everything since the original attack on Leclair has been your plan, hasn't it, Evel?! You really are terrible! How can you call yourself a decent person?!"

"Hmph. That's the way a child thinks!" Unfazed by Rafinha's accusations, Evel glowered.

"Wh-What do you mean?!"

"Don't you understand? Strategy isn't influenced by the quality of one's character. If that's beyond your comprehension, then you really are just a child!"

"Ugh!"

While Rafinha sharply gasped in horror, Inglis got Evel's attention. "So there must have been some circumstances which compelled your plans—political ones, I'm sure? Like, perhaps, an agreement with your rivals at the Triumvirate that you each would refrain from invading the surface?"

"It doesn't look like I'm refraining to me," Evel answered.

"Perhaps, but you're certainly refraining from direct military conquest. Even this is in the form of responding to Alcard's request for aid—whether or not they want that kind of aid. Labels and reality are different things. You can treat them as the difference between a public position and a private position if you want. Am I on the mark, Evel?"

"Hmph!" Evel snorted, unwilling to confirm or deny it.

Judging from his behavior, Inglis's educated guess hadn't been a bad one. "But you've fallen for the same trick."

"What...?!"

"Rani phrased things the way she did so your ego would do the talking. Thanks to that, we have a good guess of what you're up to."

In reality, of course, this wasn't true. But as Rafinha's guardian, Inglis couldn't let this go. She felt compelled to defend her.

"Th-That's right! You're the one who was fooled! Gotcha!" Rafinha taunted.

"Ugh...!" Evel gasped.

Inglis continued. "And your true goal was the ancient dragon Fufailbane who rested here. I don't know what your plans for him are, but it seems that Highland had information on him."

Inglis had sealed Fufailbane here in her past life. This fact had been passed down from generation to generation, ending up in Highland. She wasn't sure what twists and turns it had taken to get there, but this meant that if she went to Highland, she might find out

what had happened to the Silvare Kingdom after her death. It was a tantalizing hint.

“Wait! How do you know that name?! Even in Highland, that’s information only a few are allowed access to!”

“Easy. I asked him himself.”

The truth was that she’d known all along, but that answer was the most convincing. She wasn’t necessarily dead set on concealing the memories of her past life, but that would have been a long story, so it was better to leave it at that.

“You heard the ancient dragon’s voice?”

“Yes. Before you arrived here, Evel, he was quite the ally to us.”

“That’s right!” Rafinha added. “We were just about to become friends! Nobody’s allowed to be mean to him, especially not you!”

“You left him chained up and rolling around here, and you expect me to believe that?! He is vital to Highland! Such disrespectful treatment! Which of us is being mean to him?!” Evel asked.

“Uh?! Ch-Chris! Say something!”

Inglis chuckled. “Well, I have no response. Evel’s right.”

She’d had no other way to deal with Fufailbane besides restraining him.

“Exactly. There’s no real excuse to be made,” Leone said, breaking out in a cold sweat.

“Indeed... We have no choice but to admit it,” Liselotte agreed.

“So that means I’m here to save the ancient dragon from your cruelty!” Evel declared. “If you feel even the slightest bit of guilt, then sit tight and watch!”

“Very well, I will,” Inglis replied.

“Hold on a second, Chris!” Rafinha protested.

“C’mon, he’s right. Haven’t we been a bit mean to Fufailbane?”

“Well, yes, but...it’s Evel. There’s no way he has good intentions. Coming from him, it can’t be for Mr. Dragon’s sake.”

“It’s fine. If there are any problems, I’ll deal with it. Okay? Please? Let’s just watch, okay?”

“You’re just waiting for your chance, aren’t you? Hoping they’ll join forces against you or something.”

“Would it be better if I promised you’d have fun watching?”

“Come on! At least try to conceal your excitement a little bit!”

“Awwh, awwh! Faw fih, Rahi!”

“This is no time to play around, you two!” Leone reminded them.

“The dragon is awakening!” Liselotte warned.

Perhaps at Evel’s direction, something long and slender—armlike, really—stretched out from the body of the fake Prismer and undid Fufailbane’s dragonscale chain.

“Ah! Not while we’re talking! That’s not fair!” Inglis protested.

“Like I care! But...” Evel cackled. “I simply must be astonished that you were able to beat a legendary ancient dragon into such pitiful submission. I’m honestly impressed! But it’s to my advantage as well. Now that you’ve broken his will, he’ll be a bit more receptive to what I have to say.”

“Ooh, you mean there’s something even more powerful than an ancient dragon?! I can’t wait!” Inglis’s eyes glittered.

Evel’s tone and phrasing showed that he was still confident that he had the advantage. And if that held true even though he recognized that they’d subjugated the dragon, it meant his plans extended beyond simply teaming up with Fufailbane to defeat her. If that were all he had, he would have at least shown some disappointment that the dragon hadn’t been a match for her. He wouldn’t be so confident.

That meant he had some other plan to take her down. She couldn’t wait to see the last resort of one of Highland’s archlords.

Evel sneered. “Hmph! Remember, being too perceptive spoils the fun.”

“In that case, excuse me.” As Inglis bowed her head apologetically, Evel turned to Fufailbane, who had risen.

“Now, O ancient dragon! Grant me the power to kill this woman, who wounded your pride! Listen to my voice!”

“Oooh, I knew it! Go right ahead!” This would get Fufailbane back in the fighting spirit. Inglis would get to fight him again.

“I wasn’t talking to you! Shut up!” As Evel yelled angrily, Fufailbane spoke to Inglis.

“Old king... Is he your ally?”

“No. If anything, we’re enemies, but—”

“I see,” Fufailbane responded bluntly, and he sprang into action.

“Grahhhhhh!”

He opened his maw, lined with fangs, and bit down on Evel in an instant. His movements were amazingly fast for his size. The archlord was completely unable to react before being swallowed.

“Wha—?!” Before he could even finish his shout of surprise, he vanished into Fufailbane’s jaws.

Leone’s eyes went round. “Huh?! The dragon ate him?!”

“That was so fast! Over in the blink of an eye!” Liselotte remarked, astonished.

“Wh-What did he even come here for?” Rafinha asked. “Oh well, I suppose that’s for the best.”

“N-No it isn’t! That’s a waste!” Inglis yelled.

She hadn’t expected Fufailbane to immediately obey Evel, but she’d at least wanted Evel to have some kind of plan for if he was

attacked. Plus, she had expected the dragon to at least hear him out. Immediately devouring him instead was completely outside of her plans.

"Hmph... I did ask. If he was not your ally, surely you would have no complaint." A red fluid dripped from Fufailbane's mouth as he spoke.

Inglis was sure Evel hadn't survived. "Well... No sense complaining now, I suppose."

"If you wish to bind me again, do as you will. But remove that revolting imitation from my sight. It is most unpleasant to see such things done to the body of one of my kind." Fufailbane lay down and curled up.

Inglis had suspected it by the faint wafts of dragon lore coming from the fake Prismer, but this served as confirmation. Highland had created it from the body of an actual dragon. Fufailbane would best recognize his own kind.

"I see... If I help clean it up, maybe you'll fight me?" Inglis offered.

"How many times do I have to say it?! This irks me! Let the matter rest!"

"I won't give up! Not until you understand my passion!"

"I told you, it's because I understand! I have no interest in someone so bloodthirsty! Perhaps I'll find—" Fufailbane suddenly cut off midsentence. His body jerked, then began to shudder. *"Ah? Gah! Agggh!"*

"Huh?! Fufailbane! What's wrong?!"

"I'm not really sure, but it seems like you were too pushy and now he's really mad!" Rafinha said.

"That can't be! I thought we were getting on really well!" Inglis pouted.

"B-But something's definitely wrong with him!" Leone said.

"What's happening?!" Liselotte gasped.

"Rooooooaaaaarrrrrrrrr!"

Fufailbane let out a tremendous roar. Moments later, he came to a sudden stop, going quiet. Inglis wasn't sure why, but one of his feet clenched and unclenched, as if he was checking to see if it moved.

Inglis watched silently, wary.

"Bwa ha ha... Excellent! It worked!" the dragon said out loud.

"Huh?! Human speech?!" Inglis was at a loss.

Up until now, Fufailbane had communicated in Draconic with the use of dragon lore. He might well have been capable of human speech, but given his pride, he would have had no intention of using it.

"H-He talked! I heard him!" Rafinha yelped.

"I heard him too!" Leone said.

“Myself as well!” Liselotte said.

“So that was human speech—was it Evel speaking?!” Inglis exclaimed.

“Whaaat?!” the others shrieked.

Now in Fufailbane’s form, Evel smugly appreciated the shocked reactions of Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte.

“Did you think I’d be taken down that easily? Too bad!” he taunted. “Why do you think I left my will in that piece of scrap for so long?! Why did I bother drawing you here rather than blowing you all up with it along the way?! It was all to perfect this Mind Blast technique! It overwhelms the spirit of a sentient being and replaces their will with my own! An ancient dragon is a proud beast, one that must not be at the mercy of a human. This was a whole lot faster than talking anyway!”

Inglis had a good idea of what had gone on with Evel’s plan. “I see... So, forcing your will into Ian was an experiment. And when Ian went missing from our group, it was to further enhance the results.”

“That’s right! I buried this mechanical dragon underneath the capital and led you here so you’d be around only once my preparations were complete!”

“Oh, I get it! That’s why you kidnapped Pullum!” Rafinha said.

“You knew that if Pullum was missing, we’d come straight to Leclair!” Leone said.

“You tricked us!” Liselotte accused.

“Well, I hadn’t expected *that* woman—Tiffanyer—would be so ineffective that you’d dig up the ancient dragon, but I suppose with how things have turned out, it’s become a nonissue! Ha ha ha ha!” Evel cackled.

“Congratulations. Now, then, shall we put it to the test?” Inglis offered. “You have a wonderful guinea pig right here to work with.” She proudly patted her chest.

Fufailbane’s might with Evel’s will was the perfect combination. He, at least, would be sure to fight her over and over.

Evel chuckled as the dragon. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. Do you really think this is all? You said it yourself—there’s something more powerful than an ancient dragon. Now be silent and watch.”

“Ooh! My apologies. I can’t wait to see!”

“Hmph! Stop being so pleased about this! I will see terror and despair written across your face! Prepare yourself!”

“Yes! Will do!” Inglis’s eyes sparkled in anticipation.

Evel used Fufailbane’s form to hiss in disgust. “How impudent you are! Truly as vexing as possible!” He turned to the nearby fake Prismer. “To me, mechanical dragon! For Highland’s future! To become a shield that protects the pontifex! A Guardian is born!”

The false Prismer began to shine dazzlingly. Countless long, thin arms sprang forth all along it and wrapped around Fufailbane. The intense glow grew greater still, eating away at the ancient dragon's body, and the light grew even brighter, resonating with Fufailbane. Inglis could hardly keep her eyes open.

"I-It's so bright! I can't see!" Rafinha cried.

"Don't look directly at it, Rani," Inglis instructed. "Look down, and follow its shadow on the ground. You too, Leone and Liselotte!"

"Understood!"

"I shall!"

With a complex harmony of sounds weaving together—mechanical creaking, the dull thud of a strike hitting flesh, squelching as if something was being stirred together—the two tremendous shadows on the ground merged into one.

As a single form became clear, the light faded little by little, and what Inglis and the others saw was something far larger than Fufailbane or the mechanical dragon on their own.

"Wow, amazing!" Inglis said.

The basis of this new being was Fufailbane, but it was studded all over its joints and head with robust armor. Its legs had lengthened, and now it could stand upright. A number of cannons worthy of a Highland flying battleship protruded from its mechanized parts. In particular, the two huge cannons protruding from its shoulders were breathtaking; Inglis thought they might pack even more power than Fufailbane's dragon breath attack. The strength of the dragon lore she could feel from its entire form was even more focused. Combined with the mana from Highlander technology, it served as an evolution of an ancient dragon—tougher, fiercer, and practically herculean.

"Wh-What's that?!" Rafinha gasped as she cowered, awestruck. "It's like Mr. Dragon was combined with a Highland ship!"

"It's so intense! Is this Highland's true power?!" Leone asked.

"S-So this is what he was after!" Liselotte said.

The mechanical ancient dragon clenched its mechanical fists as it spoke Evel's words. "Breathtaking, isn't it?! Power beyond even a legendary ancient dragon—a mechanical dragon based on Fufailbane. A mechanical ancient dragon, then! Power fitting to become a shield protecting the pontifex! He may call turning an ancient dragon into a weapon a sin, but it's the duty of an archlord to protect him no matter what!"

Inglis chuckled. "How wonderful! It looks so striking. It looks so cool! And I can feel its power! I see no shortcomings in you. I'd be glad to take you on!"

This mechanical ancient dragon was the perfect foe to test the dragonscale sword she'd worked so hard to forge. This being had to be

a greater challenge than Fufailbane, who was still a great foe. In that case, it was probably the most powerful opponent she'd yet faced in both of her lifetimes. This fight would take her development to new heights. She couldn't help but tremble in anticipation. *I really am glad I came to Alcard.*

"Haaaah!" Activating Aether Shell, she leaped from the *Star Princess* and landed straight in front of the mechanical ancient dragon. The dragonscale sword she gripped was immersed in aether, but it showed no signs of breaking. How resilient would it be? How *strong* would it be? She was extremely excited to find out. "Go ahead, come at me from any angle!" She lightly hefted the massive sword on her shoulders—it being as large as she was tall—ready to strike at any moment.

Evel cackled. "And now you want to fight the mechanical ancient dragon?!" he challenged.

"Yes! I won't disappoint you!"

"How arrogant!" Every cannon but those on its shoulders fired a volley of light at Inglis.

Blam, blam, blam!

An overwhelming number of blasts fell around her, churning up the dirt and snow and blocking her vision. However, as she'd expected, none hit her. It was clearly just suppressive fire.

Her heart leaped in excitement, eager for what would come next.

Her vision cleared, and she looked forth, only to see the mechanical ancient dragon soar off, disappearing into the yonder clouds above.

"Huh?! Errr, what's wrong?! Where are you going?!"

"I'm returning to Highland! I told you! The mechanical ancient dragon is a shield to protect the pontifex from the throne faction! It's a valuable military asset! As if I'd waste my time on you, a mere rank-and-file soldier! That would gain me nothing. Know your place!"

Evel had called her arrogant--and now that he had the power of the mechanical ancient dragon, that was no mere boast. At this point, he meant that he saw no value in fighting her and had no intention of doing so. Inglis had assumed he'd been acting haughty due to his personality, but she'd misunderstood his intentions.

"That's not fair!" Inglis whined. "Not only do you block me from a good fight, but you're not even stepping in yourself instead?!"

"Like I care! I don't recall making any promises! But it sure is nice to see you so frustrated! Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!" Evel's laughter hung in the air, while he disappeared into the far-off clouds.

"Ugh... Now how am I gonna try out the sword I worked so hard

on?" Inglis slumped her shoulders.

Rafinha descended from the *Star Princess* and softly approached her. "Ahh. Well, I guess he was right about one thing."

"Huh?"

"Terror and despair *are* written all over your face. At least despair definitely is. Anyway, cheer up. It'll be all right." For once, Rafinha's and Inglis's positions were switched, with Rafinha patting Inglis's head to calm her.

"Rani, I think I may have made some mistakes in life..."

"Well, yeah, I know, but...you're only realizing that now?"

"I guess there are situations where if you're not a big enough fish, someone will ignore you... Maybe if I wanted to fight that mechanical ancient dragon, I needed to establish my own country and go to war with Highland... Should I have taken that position as a knight captain?"

"C'mon, you're making another mistake by dwelling on it. Stop."

"Ugh... Well, Rani, can't you become someone important for me so I can fight that thing?"

"No way! Why don't you marry Rafael? Then you'd at least be a duchess. I think he'll always be a bigger deal than I am."

"Absolutely not! I have no intention of getting married—"

It was only then that Leone and Liselotte rejoined the pair.

"Well, I don't think Evel's coming back, so all's well that ends well," Leone said. "We've got plenty of food stored up, so we'll be fine for now."

"Indeed. If Inglis was right about the ancient dragon causing the harsh climate here, we would have needed to move him along eventually anyway," Liselotte pointed out.

"Yeah," Rafinha said. "I guess you don't get to keep him, Chris. I feel sorry for Mr. Dragon, but it's for the best. I'm sure Ian would be happy for Leclair to recover and grow warm enough for a healthy harvest."

"Yes. I'm sure he would," Leone agreed.

"That seems to be what he wished for most of all..." Liselotte said.

Rafinha and the others looked somberly up at the sky, the dragon now absent. Inglis watched them but couldn't find anything to say; she just sighed deeply. "I wish I could have fought the mechanical ancient dragon..."

"Well, it's long gone, so stop worrying about it. C'mon, I want to see how Pullum is doing. Let's head back. You can have a nice big helping of meat to distract you. Nothing like a tasty meal to help you forget your sorrows!" Rafinha insisted.

Inglis paused, coming to a realization. "That's right! I'll help myself to that meat! I'm gonna eat and eat and eat, no holding back!"

“Right, right! And I’ll help out!”

Leone whispered to Liselotte, “They were holding back before?”

“Well...I suppose what goes on in their stomachs is completely ineffable.”

In any case, Inglis and the others returned to the camp.



With formality, Lahti addressed the crowd from in front of the house at the center of the encampment. “Listen up, everyone!” Pullum was standing beside him, uncomfortable as she stared at the ground.

Pullum had already regained consciousness by the time Inglis returned to camp. After a short rest for everyone to calm down, Lahti had gathered his people. Inglis and the others stood a short distance from the crowd, near Lewin and his knights, and kept watch. Due to the recent events, both the civilians and the knights were on edge.

“Fifh! Vih camh lef ah gahzown! Vih hohnhoh vuh meh hehhuh! (Chris! We can’t let our guard down! We don’t know what might happen!)”

“Ehnow. Vuh illee oheh, Rahi! (I know. But it’ll be okay, Rani!)”

In the midst of all this, Inglis and Rafinha were hard at work, keeping their mouths busy. They carried plates piled high with grilled skewers of meat. They had said they wanted to make up for the disappointment of not being able to fight the mechanical ancient dragon—and they sure were soothing their souls by eating and eating and eating. They’d fall into a spiral if it weren’t for the meat as a distraction.

“Are you saying not to let your guard down?” Leone asked. Inglis and Rafinha nodded fervently in response. “I’m not sure how this counts as being on alert, though. Sheesh...”

“No matter how you look at it, they’re slacking off,” Liselotte said.

As the two sighed in exasperation at their friends, Lahti continued speaking to the people. “I’ve heard in more detail about the disturbance just now. First, rest assured, I have no intention of punishing anyone.”

That, at least, brought a sense of relief to the crowd. The leader of the commotion had been Ian, and he’d even raised his blade against the knights. Plus, Pullum had been seriously injured. It would not have been surprising if Lahti had ordered the arrest of everyone involved.

“I have no intention of punishing her either.” Lahti approached Pullum and placed a hand on her shoulder. “What Harim did was unforgivable. I understand that some of you may not want to forgive his sister, Pullum—I cannot tell you how to feel. No matter how much I say they’re different people, it’s not that simple.”

“Fmmmm...” Inglis ate with great relish as she listened to Lahti. The ancient dragon’s meat was delicious even at a time like this.

From a logical perspective, each person was responsible for their own deeds. Blaming Pullum for what Harim had done was contemptible, but it was also true that the people had nowhere else to lay their blame. Leone, too, had been placed in a difficult situation because of similar circumstances. A good king was lawful and just—but a good king also followed the hearts of his people. And when viewed in the context of the current situation, those two things contradicted each other. The right choice varied depending on who you asked, and even the same words, offered to the people, might have different results depending on who spoke them. At times like these, it was best to show clear leadership.

“That’s why I’m going to be honest with you about my own feelings!” Lahti’s eyes filled with determination. “As prince of this country, I declare that I will take her—that I will take Pullum as my queen!”

The blended gasps of various emotions became an uproar.

“Huhhhhh?!”

“Oh?!”

“Wh-What?!”

“If Harim’s crimes are Pullum’s, then Pullum’s crimes are my own! And I will dedicate my life to atoning for them! I will rebuild Leclair and make it more prosperous than ever before! So...please give us time to continue our work! Please!” Lahti punctuated his passion with a deep bow to the crowd.

“Um... Lahti! I...” Pullum began.

“What, don’t tell me now you don’t want to! I already said it!”

“B-But... That’s so...” Her sniffles turned to sobs.

Lahti panicked. “This is no time to cry! Quick, bow too!”

“O-Okay!”

And as the two bowed to the crowd—

Clap, clap, clap, clap!

Rafinha, beside Inglis, was the first to begin the applause. “Vahfoo! Vahfahfeh! Cahnzhazhurayhuh! (That’s good! That’s perfect! Congratulations!)” she said with her mouth still full of ancient dragon meat. She was moved to tears, chewing and clapping. She was quite busy.

“Rahi!” Inglis interjected. “Vey whu vi ahle fu uhnuhfaeh ooh lifaeh! (Rani! They won’t be able to understand you like that!)”

“Both of you! Come on, let’s do this properly!” Leone scolded as she gave her own applause to Lahti and Pullum.

“We’re in full agreement! We support you!” Liselotte cheered.

Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte shone with maidenly yearning. Inglis didn’t share their enthusiasm, and she focused on a different point; as someone with no interest in marriage, if she were in that position, she’d have no choice but to refuse. However, rejecting someone so publicly would cause deep embarrassment to the other person. Fortunately, there were no real worries of Pullum rejecting Lahti, so it turned out well in the end.

And Inglis couldn’t really criticize the choice to handle things this way. It had been naive and awkward, but charming all the same.

Clap, clap, clap, clap, clap, clap!

The applause grew, spreading through the crowd as others joined in. The people here all had their own stories, but in the end, they’d gathered in this encampment because they admired Prince Lahti, who had freed Leclair and meant to rebuild it. Some would follow Lahti’s lead no matter what, and others would be moved by his determination and attitude. Surely some were not yet convinced, but were willing to trust him and see where that led.

One person from the crowd said, “I believe in Pullum! She put herself in harm’s way to save me! That can’t have been an empty gesture! She really cares about us!”

Several of the people were beginning to believe in Pullum. Her injury seemed to have stirred something in others’ hearts. Most importantly, there was no need to worry about the day’s chaos being repeated in the near future.

“All right, now prove to us that you’re serious! Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!” Rafinha began to chant at Lahti and Pullum. Her calls, like something a drunkard would say, were a bit unbecoming.

“Wha—?! What are you talking about, you idiot?! I can’t do that in front of this many people! Not for our first time!” Lahti’s face turned bright red.

“R-Rani...come on. You’re embarrassing them,” Inglis said.

“But I think it’s important that they prove they’re serious! Right?!”

“Yes!” Leone said.

“Indeed,” Liselotte chimed in. The two of them were normally more polite than Rafinha was, but this time Inglis thought they were all being ridiculous. As the crowd around them began to cheer, a strange sense of anticipation settled over Lahti and Pullum.

“Good grief,” Inglis muttered. This wasn’t going to be put to rest so easily. She had no avenue to do so, and all she could do was watch while continuing her meal.

Pullum stepped closer to Lahti, getting on her tiptoes, and gently

placed her lips on his. Lahti's eyes sprung wide.



“Whooooooo!” The crowd went wild.

“Wh-What are you doing, Pullum?! I thought you were more modest than this!” Lahti protested.

Pullum laughed. “This is my answer. ‘Til death do us part.” A beaming smile spread across her tear-drenched cheeks. She absolutely glowed.

“Y-Yeah,” he stammered. “You got it.”

As the two smiled at each other, Rafinha couldn’t contain her excitement. “Did you see that? *Did you see that?! So daring!*”

“Yes. Quite the learning experience!” Liselotte agreed.

“That must be nice... I guess for me it’ll go a little different, though.” Leone was happy for them, but she also felt a bit forlorn at her own circumstances. She didn’t have a prince who would share her worst moments and protect her. She had to shoulder the stigma attached to the Olfas all by herself.

“Well, Leone, at least you have us, right?” Inglis said.

“That’s right! What Chris said!” Rafinha agreed.

“Precisely. We’re not princes, but we can make up for that in number,” Liselotte said.

Leone laughed. “You all make a good point. Thank you.”

As joy and hope for the future of the land filled the square, a voice suddenly called out from overhead.

“Prince Lahti! Prince Lahti!”

A single Flygear had swooped in at full speed. It was from the Flygear Port and was used by messengers.

“Huh?! Yeah! I’m here! What happened?!”

“Major trouble, Your Highness! Prince Windsel’s forces, which were posted on the border, are now marching this way!”

“What?! Why’s my brother sending an army here?!”

“Isn’t it obvious, Prince Lahti?! He plans to take the credit and prestige you’ve earned for himself!” Captain Lewin warned, ever loyal to Lahti.

“What?!”

Inglis agreed with Lewin’s read on the situation. “A succession struggle, huh. Sounds likely.”

“But how foolish he is to abandon the standoff with Karelia and turn his forces on us!” Lewin insisted.

“He might have signed a ceasefire with the Karelian forces,” Inglis suggested.

“That is possible...but while our forces are still small, if he’s trying to strangle us in the cradle, he’s made the wrong choice. In a certain way, the advantage lies with us.”

“How so?”

“You, Inglis. With your power, a moderate gap in numbers doesn’t matter. And letting him make a move he can’t take back will tilt the future in our favor.”

“I see. That makes sense.”

Lewin paused before getting to the point. “So, can we rely on you? Can we rely on you to use your power at full force for Prince Lahti?”

Inglis laughed. “I suppose you can.”

As Inglis grinned boldly, Rafinha objected. “H-Hey, hold it, Chris! You can’t just get involved directly like that!”

“It won’t cause any problems if I don’t kill anyone. I promise I’ll only knock them out.”

“I suppose that might work,” Lewin pondered.

“No, wait, even if you’re just trying to knock them out, no attacking them out of nowhere! We need to talk it out first!” Rafinha insisted.

Another Flygear arrived. “Prince Lahti! Prince Lahti! Is the prince here?!”

“Again?! I’m here! What is it?!”

“Your Highness! I’m the messenger who was sent to the Karelian army!” the knight aboard the second Flygear began. They had wanted to inform Duke Bilford and the others with the Karelian army of what had happened here, as well as to ask him to wait before entering Alcard. “I’ve been informed of the situation on the Karelian side. The Paladins have been routed on the eastern front with Venefic and are retreating in disorder! Only minimal forces have been left on the front with Alcard as they turn to reinforce!”

“Whaaat?!” Rafinha and the others raised their voices in shock.

“No way... My brother lost?!” Rafinha cried.

“I-I can’t believe it!” Leone said. “Even though the Paladins are so strong?!”

“Yes,” Liselotte said. “Even with two hialar menaces. How?!”

“Do you know the cause of their defeat?” Inglis asked the messenger calmly.

“During the battle, the frozen Prismer which was placed near the border revived and began to advance on Chiral! The Paladins’ formation fell apart as they regrouped to hold it back!”

Inglis blinked in surprise. “Understood. Thank you.” Inglis bowed politely to the knight.

“Things are bad... Where do we even go?” Leone asked.

“If we leave here in a hurry, things will be bad here too!” Rafinha insisted. “I know Rafael, Eris, and Ripple will be fine! We just have to believe in them, while we do what we can here. Once that’s over, we’ll head back to Karelia!”

“I agree!” Liselotte said. “Despite your worry about Rafael, you

would still see things through here... I'm impressed, Rafinha."

Rafinha chuckled. "I *am* the little sister of a holy knight! Chris, you're okay with that, right? You'll get to fight the force closing in on us, and then a Prismer!"

"No, that won't work. We need to go back and deal with that Prismer before things become disastrous in Karelia!"

Inglis's refutation and shake of her head came as a heavy rebuttal to the determined air of the group.



Extra: The Best Souvenir

One night, a few days before they received word of the Paladins' defeat, something huge was about to arrive in Inglis's makeshift dragonscale smithy on the outskirts of the encampment.

"Wow!"

"Wh-What is that thing?!"

"It's huge!"

It was an all-white ball—that is, a snowball. But this was no ordinary snowball; it was many times the height of a person. The knights and civilians who saw it were simply overwhelmed by its presence.

"Heave-ho! Heave-ho!" Pushing it was, of course, Inglis. She rolled the snowball to the edge of the crater she'd created by striking Fufailbane's scales and sighed in relief. The hole had been paved, somewhat crudely, with stones.

"Rani! Here it comes! No one's inside, right?" The snowball was so big that she couldn't see around it.

"Go right ahead! The coast's clear!"

"All right!"

One more push.

Thump!

The huge snowball filled the pit, its upper half peeking out. With this, the preparations were complete.

"Perfect! Hurry up, Chris! I can't wait to relax!"

"Okay, Rani."

"Hold it, you two," Leone interjected. "Isn't this too much?"

But she was a moment too late to stop them. Inglis had already focused the mana she'd converted from aether and completed her spell. "Come forth! Open-air bath!"

Whoomph!

A pillar of flame pierced the center of the snowball. Inglis had come this far in the use of even flame magic, a category she hadn't used much at all, thanks to her daily training. The rising flames swiftly melted the snowball.

“Wh—?!”

Splooosh!

Inglis and the others, near the edge of the pit, were swamped by a wave of warm water. They were unable to avoid it and ended up completely soaked.

“Did I overdo it a bit?” Inglis asked.

“Yeah, that was a bit much,” Leone answered.

“I’m drenched...” Liselotte complained.

“It’s okay, we can dry everything off while we’re relaxing! We know it’s nice and warm too! Let’s hurry up and take a bath!”

“Ah! Don’t undress yet, Rani! People are watching!” Inglis kept Rafinha from undressing as she cleared out the stragglers, and then it was time for the group to enjoy an open-air bath of their own making.

“Mmm, this feels great! ♪ It was a great use of that hole you made!” Rafinha exhaled in satisfaction as she sat in the warm water. She had been the one to suggest making a bath out of the crater Inglis had created while processing Fufailbane’s scales.

“Yeah, Rani. It’s nice to be able to look up at the stars as I bathe.”

“It’s really liberating, isn’t it?” Leone added.

“One stays toasty warm, yet the air is cool and refreshing,” Liselotte said.

“And look, everyone. You can see the reflection of the stars in the water. It’s beautiful!” Even Pullum glowed despite having been down in the dumps lately.

“You’re right—and there’s nothing like beautiful scenery to make food even more delicious!”

“Agreed, Rani.”

Inglis and Rafinha each held chunks of Fufailbane’s tail meat. Floating on a wooden plate in the bath were several more.

“Well, that rather spoils the scenery.” Liselotte pouted.

“Yeah,” Leone agreed.

“Nah, it’s fine. There are plenty of people who drink wine in outdoor baths. Isn’t eating meat a similar kind of enjoyment?” Inglis asked.

“Aha ha... Well, I guess so, though it does seem a bit crude,” Leone replied.

“Really? My family does it all the time. Even Rafael,” Rafinha replied.

“Huh?! *Rafael*?! I can’t believe it!”

“But he’s such a graceful, elegant man!” Liselotte said.

“It’s true! If anything, he’s more into it than we are,” Rafinha confirmed.

“I remember one day Rani suddenly said that she wanted to eat in the bath,” Inglis mused. “What an experience that was. When I asked her, she said she got the idea from Rafael... Anyway, she was insistent, so I went along with it, and she ended up spilling seafood stew all over. It was a huge mess. The water ended up filthy.”

“Aha ha, really? You have a great memory. How old were we then anyway?”

“Five. I remember it clearly.” To Inglis, whose perceptions were already those of an adult then, something only ten years ago was the recent past. “But you were so tiny then, Rani, and now you’re almost grown up. Time flies, doesn’t it?” She was practically teary-eyed thinking about how proud she was of Rafinha.

For some reason, Rafinha was displeased. “Grr. What are you talking about? I haven’t grown at all since then!”

“Huh? Are you sure?”

“Very! Nothing’s changed *here*!” Rafinha clapped a hand to her slender chest. “Must be nice for you, ‘growing up’ so much and leaving me behind! That’s the reason you get to talk like you’re such an adult!”

“W-Wait, that wasn’t what I meant by that! I meant, like, growing as a person...”

“That’s why I’m saying it’s not fair! Ahh, I’m so jealous, at least let me see what they feel like!”

“Aaah! That’s— Eek! S-Stop! I’ll drop the meat!”

“Bwa ha ha. You’d better not squirm, then! If you do, you’ll drop it!”

“Ugh! Sheesh!”

“Really, though, I wonder how Rafael’s doing. Now that we’re talking about him, I really do miss him. I want to feed him some of the dragon meat—he’d love it, wouldn’t he, Chris?”

“Y-Yeah. I think he would. Now could you take your hands off my chest?”

“Nooo waaay! ♪ Not until you’ve had time to think about what you said.”

“Rafael’s on the border with Venefic now, isn’t he...? I wonder how that front of the war is going,” Leone pondered, doing her best to ignore Inglis and Rafinha’s shenanigans.

“He’s with the Paladins, not to mention Lady Eris and Lady Ripple, so there’s little he’s unprepared for. Though, knowing that, Venefic may have also deployed a hialal menace and a knight with a special-class Rune to fight them...” Liselotte said.

“You’re probably right, Liselotte,” Rafinha said. “I don’t know much about it, but I suppose Venefic probably does have a hialal menace and a holy knight.”

“Yes, I believe that may be the case,” Liselotte replied. “Their General Rochefort—whose nom de guerre is ‘the Red Lion’—once met Rafael in a tournament while he was a student at the knights’ academy, and they seemed to be evenly matched. My father said that he too had a special-class Rune.”

“An even match for Rafael, huh...” Inglis said.

Karelia had been an enemy of Venefic for many years, with acts of aggression from Venefic being a constant even recently. Their willingness to attack showed they had something up their sleeves for standing up to Karelia. A knight with a special-class Rune and a hial menace to match would put the countries on similar levels. And if the situation on the eastern border became a full-scale conflict, there would be a good chance that those would come to the forefront.

Quite an interesting battlefield that’d be. She laughed. “When the situation here is resolved, I’ve got something to look forward to. Once we deal with everything here, let’s go help him out. We can give him some of that dragon jerky as a souvenir. Imagine the smile on his face, Rani.”

“Yeah.” Rafinha giggled. “And that means I need to keep massaging you right here so he’ll be even happier to see you and how much bigger they’ve gotten! Some delicious meat, or an adorable Chris. I wonder which one Rafael will think is the best souvenir!”

“Knock it off, Rani! That’s absurd— Eek! S-Stop it! Stop it!”

Inglis’s shrieks echoed under the beautiful starry sky for quite some time...

Afterword

First, thank you very much for picking up this book! So, that's the sixth volume of *Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire* ♀. I hope you enjoyed it. I was really busy with work again this time, so I ended up having to push back the deadline over and over, but in the end, I managed to get it done, thankfully.

As I touched on in the last volume, I decided to quit my job and try being a full-time writer for a while. I may end up regretfully slinking back to moonlighting in a few years, but I think my old company would take me back, and I'm grateful for that. From now on, I'm going to pick up the pace and do my best! The overarching plot is in a good place, so I'd like to really kick things into high gear.

Finally, I'd like to thank my editor N, the illustrator Nagu, and everyone else involved for their hard work and dedication. Goodbye for now!



“Ugh...
Isn't that
enough?
Come on,
this is embar-
rassing.”

“Th-Then,
just to see
what it
feels like...
Wow, this
is amazing!
She really
is soft and
supple.”

Pullum

A girl in the knight program who
is from Alcard. She cares a lot
about Alcard's Prince Lahti.

Inglis (Chris)

The former hero-king, reborn
in the far future as a girl. She
is currently infiltrating the
northern country of Alcard.



“What
is this?!
The
waves
of your
aether
are
those
of the
old
king,
but...”

Ancient Dragon Fufailbane

An ancient dragon who slumbered
far beneath Alcaid. He knew
Hero-King Inglis well.

Inglis's dainty grin perplexed the
dragon. The gigantic beast's face
wore no expression, but he tilted
his head as if questioning her.

“Why,
hello. It's
been so
long. I'm
glad to
see you
haven't
changed
at all.”





“Ha ha
ha ha!
Quit
joking
around...
As if
anyone
could
stop
me!”

Evel

A Highlander with the grand Archlord rank. He was thought to have been killed by the black-masked man...

Bonus Short Stories

Dragonscale Armor

In the central area of the camp, in the plaza where the kitchens were located, three girls prepared to dine.

“Inglis is late. It’s almost dinnertime,” Leone said.

“Perhaps she’s still working on something,” Liselotte pondered.

The heavy clanking of Inglis’s fists striking dragon scales was still echoing from deep within the forest.

“Well, that clanking noise is proof she’s fine, so no need to worry. Shall we get started? Bon appétit! ♪” Rafinha said, before shoveling meat into her mouth at a tremendous rate. “Mmm, it’s still delicious! ♪”

“Well, yes, but...” Leone replied.

“I’m surprised you haven’t gotten bored of it by now,” Liselotte said. “If anything, you’re eating more and more, faster and faster.”

“That’s right!” Rafinha agreed. “I normally try to hold back a little. It’s bad manners to make so much work for the lunch ladies or to run them out of food.”

“That was you *holding back*?!” Leone and Liselotte gasped together.

“Yep! We can always get more meat here, so I really can have all I can eat. And once I started having these bigger meals, it just meant that I got used to making room for even more. See? I’m growing up a little more every day!”

“I’m not sure if I’d call that growing up...” Leone winced.

“All right! It would be a waste of this amazing meat to let it get cold and dried up, so I’m gonna eat Chris’s too!” Rafinha declared.

“I think your fuel efficiency has decreased significantly,” Liselotte said.

“Definitely,” Leone said.

“Ah! Rani!” Inglis shouted as she arrived. “That’s my portion! Are you just gonna take it?!”

“You were late! All’s fair in thirst and hunger!” Rafinha insisted.

“Sheesh! And after I put all this work in for your sake...”

“Huh? You did? Wow, what’ve you got?”

“Children who eat other people’s food without permission don’t get to—mmph?!” Inglis stopped as Rafinha crammed a skewer of meat into her mouth.

“See, there’s plenty left. Just enjoy it, and don’t worry about it.”

Happily chewing away with a mouth full of food, Inglis offered something to Rafinha. “Okay, okay—here, take a look, Rani.”

It glimmered in the colors of Fufailbane’s scales—silver with a faint blue tinge.

“Hmm? A...breastplate?”

“Yes, yes! The shape is a little funny, but I made it for you. I thought that since you have an Artifact, you should have some armor too—in return for the clothes you made me.”

“Wow! Thanks, Chris! You’re so thoughtful!” Rafinha’s eyes glittered with joy. A knight really did need a means of protecting himself.

Inglis chuckled. “Leone, Liselotte, if we get more scales tomorrow, I’ll make ones for you too.”

Both were plenty pleased.

“That would be great! Thanks, Inglis!”

“Thank you so very much! That would be wonderful!”

“Hey, Chris,” Rafinha cut in. “Mind if I try it on now?”

“Of course not,” Inglis replied. “Go right ahead. I’ll help you put it on.” She strapped the breastplate onto Rafinha. “There we go.”

“I wonder how it feels wearing—whoa!” Rafinha tried to stand up, but fell over right to the floor.

“What?!” Inglis gasped. “R-Rani! What’s wrong?!”

“It’s sooooo heaaavyyy... I can’t move at all with this thing on!”

“Huh? R-Really? Maybe I went too far with it?” Inglis had pounded the scales denser and denser, the better to protect her dear Rafinha, but all her loving labor had accomplished was making the breastplate too heavy to wear.

“Ugh! I can’t stand up!” Rafinha protested. “Someone help me!”

“Sorry, sorry...” Inglis apologized.

“Silly Chris! What good does this do me?!”

“I, uh, I don’t really think I need one either,” Leone commented.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to pass as well,” Liselotte agreed.

Inglis sat in sorrowful silence.

Remedial Lessons

In the wooden cabin where Inglis and her friends slept, Rafinha gave a mighty yawn.

“Mm, morning, Chris.”

“Good morning, Rani. Breakfast’s almost ready.” Inglis was in the middle of roasting meat for breakfast in the fireplace. The skewered meat sizzled alluringly.

“Oh, thanks, Chris! ♪ Looks like another day of aaall-we-can-eat!

J”
“Indeed! Sleeping well, eating well, and fighting well... This is the life.”

“I hope we don’t have to go back to the academy soon. I do miss the cafeteria, but I’m enjoying skipping classes.”

Inglis grunted in dismayed surprise. “Well, that’s not good. We can’t have you falling behind on your lessons.”

“C’mon, it’s fine. We’re on an important mission. I’m sure they’re just marking all our tests as perfect scores while we’re gone.”

“No, no. You need to focus on your studies. When we get back, I’m asking the principal for remedial lessons for you. *And* for me.”

“Whaaaaaat?!”

“If you’d rather not, we could always start studying at night beginning today instead. I brought a textbook.”

“Ugh. Why would you do that?! You’re just like my mom sometimes.”

“Of course I am. I’m your squire. This is for your own good. If you slack off, you’ll regret it. You should be grateful for the opportunity. After all, not everyone who wants to go to the knights’ academy gets to do so. Remember Alina?”

Alina was a young girl they’d met while helping the Weismar Troupe perform in Chiral. She had been born poor and brought to the city by a human trafficker, and had never had a baptism, which meant she didn’t have a Rune, even though her natural aptitude was exceptional. She wasn’t the only child in such a situation in Karelia.

“Well...okay... Then let’s start remedial lessons today. I want to keep enjoying this meat. And now that that’s decided, that means I need to eat up and get some nutrition in my head!” Rafinha opened her mouth wide and chomped down on the meat.

“Right, right. That’s a good girl.” Inglis smiled gently, a warm glow in her eyes as she looked at Rafinha.

“Could you include me in those lessons as well?” Leone asked.

“And myself as well,” Liselotte chimed in.

“Ah, Leone, Liselotte, good morning. Sure, I can do that.”

“Thanks, Inglis. We’ll get changed and have breakfast.”

“Yes. We’ve much to do today.”

As Leone and Liselotte began to change from their underwear into their day clothes, Inglis heard a groan from their direction.

“Ugh...?!” They both froze at the same time.

“Huh?” Inglis asked. “What’s wrong, you two?”

“Oh no! M-My clothes are getting tight!” Leone complained.

“Mine as well! How could this have happened?” Liselotte agreed.

“It has to be from all the meat we’ve been eating! It’s because of our diets!”

“Yes, indeed! It must be!”

“Oh, huh. Must be rough,” Rafinha remarked.

“It must be, Rani.” Inglis and Rafinha made it very clear that they were disinterested observers.

“How can you two be so blasé about this?!” Leone fumed.

“You can afford to not have a care in the world because you both have an otherworldly metabolism!” Liselotte said.

“Yes! Our lesson today should be the secret of how to eat without gaining weight!”

“Indeed! That’s what I’d most like to learn!”

“It’s not that easy to—” Inglis and Rafinha began together.

“Then I’ll have to conduct a thorough examination!” Leone announced.

“Certainly, we must!” Liselotte agreed.

“Eek?! Stop!” Inglis and Rafinha shrieked in unison.



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Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary
Squire ♀ Volume 6
by Hayaken

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Edited by Carly Smith

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